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An Integrative Interdisciplinary Pedagogy for Well–Being in a Catastrophic Era

Jennifer Schulz
Seattle University, USA

Abstract: How do we navigate fear of catastrophic change while also foster-ing a sense of well-being in our everyday? This question provides the lived context for the story this article tells about teaching a course on imagining well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking an integrative interdisci-plinary approach that employs methods of literary analysis in conversation with phenomenological philosophy gives students insights into the necessary relationship between well-being and catastrophe that modernist discourses bypass. This approach thus underscores the limitations in disciplinary attempts to find objective measures to quantify well-being and, implicitly, to prescribe (physiological, psychological, political, or economic) methods for attaining it. Further, attending to the lived experiences of students as they encounter this integrative approach can give us insights into valuable resources that are not just material but existential. In the face of direct and immediate threats to our physical, psychological, and emotional well-being, diving into a shared exploration of loss, fear, and displacement invites students and faculty to show up increasingly in our full humanness, replete with contradiction, confusion, and ambiguity. This stance of not-knowing, as opposed to claiming to know and hence prescribing, may lend itself to new cognitive, emotional, and imag-inative avenues for self-realization and connection, which are means to the experience of well-being.

Keywords: catastrophe, well-being, integrative, interdisciplinary, pedagogy, literary study

Introduction

"Because none of this is *unprecedented*!" I said, a little too forcefully for that first day of spring quarter term in March of 2020, and cringed (inwardly) at the double negative in my sentence.

I am originally (and forever at heart) an English professor.

My students had registered a couple of months before for my class enti-tled "Imagining Well-Being in a Catastrophic Era." There were thirty of them,

most of whom I had never met before, many of whom were STEM majors; they told me that the word "catastrophic" in the course title drew them in. This course was one of several options to choose from that fell within a core requirement at my liberal arts university: Humanities and Global Challenges.[1]

I felt the need to capture and hold their attention because: the majority of my students were seniors and they had put this requirement off until their last college term; it is a literature course (and many claimed they were "still recovering" from their rigid high school English classes); they had suddenly and jarringly been placed in quarantine; and we were meeting over Zoom for the very first time.

These thirty students had registered for this course when COVID-19 was a distant virus on the other side of the world. By the first day of class, many of them had been sent back to their childhood homes. But some of them were stranded in apartments adjacent to campus because their families, who lived on the other side of the world, had already been impacted by this now not-so-distant virus.

I introduced the course theme to them by reading from my syllabus overview:

> In 1946, the World Health Organization implemented its Constitution, whose first principle reads, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The rest of the preamble underscores that the "highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."

> Aside from the fact that this fundamental right has been unrealized since its articulation and is arguably unrealistic in an age of deeply entrenched systemic inequalities born out of globalization, environmental degradation, political corruption, xenophobia and institutionalized racism, etc., the concept of "well-being"—and what constitutes it—is too complex to operationalize by means of a Constitution or the WHO itself.

> How has well-being been represented (in popular and academic discourses) as a *thing* to be attained in the 21st century? This course will offer an integrative interdisciplinary perspective on the lived experience of well-being

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1   Seattle University requires all undergraduates to complete a general education ("core") curriculum made up of twelve courses that provide "foundational knowledge in several relevant disciplines, critical inquiry, reflection on learning and values, and preparation for life as global and ethical citizens" (The Curriculum, n.d.). Students are required to take a Humanities and Global Challenges course generally in their third year. I designed "Imagining Well-Being in a Catastrophic Era" to fulfill this core requirement. Additionally, I designed it to be cross-listed as a Special Topics: Interdisciplinary Project course within the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies (IDLS) program where I teach full-time. IDLS majors are required to take one Special Topics course in addition to four other courses that help students develop interdisciplinary scholarship, community engagement, and metacognition.

particularly during a time in which humans face potential and real catastrophe from myriad sources: viral, environmental, political, social, economic, etc. It will open up a conversation about the ways in which these encounters with well-being, as imagined in literary texts, give us insights into valuable resources that are not just material commodities but existential. How do they call us into recognition of a shared human experience? We will read literary narratives of homelessness (exile, dislocation, refugee-ism, a sense of being estranged or a stranger, etc.) that, simultaneously, locate a sense of connectedness, community, and hope in the midst of such upheaval. (See Appendix A for an abridged syllabus.)

After I was done reading this introduction and briefly describing the three novels we would read (including one—"trigger warning," I joked—about a global pandemic), they said, "How did you know?"

I said, "I designed this course two years ago because none of this is *unprecedented*! And, by the way, I guess it's only fair that you know, at the outset of this class, that reading the phrase 'In these unprecedented times' in every 'official communication email' from our university's administration is really plucking at my nerves. And, furthermore, it is a patently disingenuous claim."

My thinly veiled irritation belied something bigger that was simmering for me under the surface—something that would take months to uncover and finally articulate and foreground with my students. And, perhaps, it is only now, as I narrate the story of teaching this course a year and a half later, that I am beginning to understand better the origins and implications of this course.

The arc of my story goes like this: The first iteration of the course took place during spring term 2020 as we were issued the stay-at-home order in Washington state; the third wrapped up in spring term 2021 just as most of my students and colleagues were getting vaccinated against the virus. I have thus had the unique opportunity to compare and contrast my students' responses to the course over three different academic terms that coincided with what we (naively) hoped would be the arc of the pandemic, beginning to end. During this period the pandemic had not only killed hundreds of thousands but had also revealed the inequities and injustices endemic in U.S. society. The reality of a catastrophic era in which we have been living for generations had come to be on full display and was impacting each of us personally throughout the year in which I was teaching this course.

And, indeed, each time I taught this course, that reality manifested differently based on my students' and my own ever-deepening relationship with pandemic, quarantine, racialized violence, and social-political unrest. Now, eighteen months after that first day of that first term, this course has revealed itself to me as a kind of nexus of my scholarly, pedagogical, and clinical, as well as creative work. Teaching this class during a pandemic has underscored for me what I see as my deepest commitment as a professor and psychotherapist living and working in a catastrophic era (pandemic or no): to open up spaces

for us to encounter the profound paradox and uncertainty of our existential condition. Without recognizing our relationship with mortality and loss (i.e., if we continue to live in the fiction that these are unprecedented times), we cannot experience well-being.

The Origins of the Course

When I first designed "Imagining Well-Being in a Catastrophic Era" in 2018, I did so in response to my long-term experience of teaching a course called "Narratives of Trauma" that falls within the same core requirement of Humanities and Global Challenges and is also cross-listed as a Special Topics course in the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies Program. As I have explained in an earlier volume of this journal (Schulz, 2018), I had come to recognize that students were drawn to my course on trauma narratives because my approach gave them an opportunity to explore the complexity of giving testimony to traumatic suffering, and witnessing this testimony, as essential to survival and meaning making. I watched them become more nuanced witnesses of their own lives as well as those of their classmates as they integrated psychological and interdisciplinary theories of trauma with the primary method of the course, close-reading literary narratives of trauma. Our approach to the literary texts required us to slow down, to grapple with ambiguity, and to challenge assumptions we make about "survivors," "victims," and "perpetrators." Indeed, as we encountered narrators and characters in their full humanness in these narratives, I came to recognize "Narratives of Trauma" as a course that helped enable us to recognize the fullness of our own and each other's humanity. And this recognition often manifested in a distinct, and oft-reported, sense of *well-being* in the shared space of those classrooms.

As students' reflected on the ways in which narratives of trauma resonated so poignantly with them, even if they had not experienced such violations, I recognized that I wanted to open up the contextual field to help students explore the common ground of suffering without stripping the category of traumatic experience of its specificity by calling all adverse experience "traumatic." And this was my starting point for thinking about the relationship between experiencing well-being and living in a catastrophic era. What would make teaching a course about well-being and catastrophe different from teaching a course about trauma narratives?

I began to explore this broadening context of "catastrophe" by turning to a collection of essays entitled *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (Beulens et al., 2014). In the Preface, Michael Rothberg addresses the move that I was trying to make to open the field; he notes that the work of trauma theory over the past twenty years has revealed how "the problem of individual psychic suffering became 'tangled up' with

an array of the larger problems of modernity, including industrialization, bureaucracy, and war" (p. xi). He articulates the conflict that I was facing: "Even as we seek to maintain trauma as a theoretical category, we should not, of course, attempt to subsume all forms of violence, dislocation, and psychic pain under its categorical singularity" (p. xiii). He argues for next steps in studying the complex problem of trauma when he proposes uncoupling the study from an exclusive focus on "event-centered accounts of violence" (p. xv)—even accounts of a long genealogy of events, as in the case of racialized violence. He suggests that we should also explore these events within a complex fabric or matrix of systems that support globalization and all its attendant catastrophic consequences (e.g. exploitation of laborers, industrial accidents, climate change). He invokes Rob Nixon's concept of the "slow violence" wrought by these complex systems in which we are all implicated subjects (p. xv). Rothberg writes,

> The slow violence of climate change does not only require a shift in temporal perception away from the shattering event of classically conceived trauma; it also requires a recalibrated understanding of humanist history and subjectivity that displaces (without entirely eliminating) the positions of victim and perpetrator. (p. xvi)

Indeed, Rothberg's recommendation of a "shift in temporal perception" away from sudden rupture to slow and systemic catastrophes would later inform my irritated response to the fiction that we are living in "unprecedented" times.

Further, Rothberg's discussion of the concept of "implicated subject" also influenced my thinking on the new course I hoped to teach. The concept is crucial in disrupting these dichotomous positions of victim and perpetrator that are used in politically coercive ways and that continue to divest individuals of their subjectivity as well as their self- (and group-) determinations. And the complexity inherent in the concept of "implication" reminds us of our ever-shifting relationships with, proximities to, and distances from power that Black feminist theories of intersectionality help us understand. In *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victim and Perpetrator*, Rothberg (2019) underscores this complexity and extends it beyond the structural, pointing to the existential, when he writes,

> It goes without saying that contexts of injustice are multiple and often contradictory, and that categories such as "perpetrator," "victim," and "implicated subject" are abstractions that serve analytical purposes *but do not describe human essences*. That is, it is best to think of the implicated subject (not to mention the victim and the perpetrator) as a position that we occupy in particular, dynamic, and at times clashing structures and histories of power; it is not an ontological identity that freezes us forever in proximity to power and privilege. (p. 8, emphasis added)

As I read this I was struck by the ways in which studying narratives of trauma implicated my students and me in the complex work of witnessing, which required that we actively reject systemic attempts to silence or delegitimize such testimony. And, in the space of the classroom, it required that we witness each other anew, outside of categories of the subject positions we imagined we (and others) occupied, as if they were fixed and determining.

So when I chose the title for my new course, "Imagining Well-Being in a Catastrophic Era," I was very deliberate about each part of the title. I hoped to invite students to explore this broader context of *catastrophe* in which we are all implicated, but also to come to a complex understanding of how we experience and foster *well-being* within this context. Because teaching trauma narratives had awakened my interest in this phenomenon as my students and I experienced a sense of well-being, I decided to take a similarly interdisciplinary approach to this course with the expectation that exploring the limitations of discipline-specific approaches to the subject might yield similar rewards—both a sense of well-being in the context of catastrophe and an understanding that that phenomenon cannot be isolated, quantified, or replicated through empirical methods in the social or natural sciences.

And I searched for ways to again use an integrative interdisciplinary pedagogy such as I had used in my trauma class to show the relationship between the two phenomena: catastrophe and well-being. When I had begun research for this course in a pre-COVID time, I explored proliferating discourses in scholarship and popular culture that were envisioning and predicting catastrophe in the form of societal extinction; they seemed to be signaling a growing sense that well-being could no longer be taken for granted among those who have relied on their well-being as an inalienable right simply by virtue of their class and race status. However, at the same time, I found that the phenomenon of well-being was being energetically researched through myriad modernist academic disciplinary lenses by scholars working to find objective measures to quantify well-being and, implicitly, to prescribe (physiological, psychological, political, economic) methods for attaining it.

These discourses have manifested in popular culture trends that offer tools for ameliorating suffering in the form of consumable products such as self-help books, vitamin supplements, and treatment programs that promise well-being as an outcome of the disciplined hard work of self-re-making. In my fifteen years working as psychotherapist specializing in trauma, I have witnessed how these prescriptions for well-being have impacted my clients in ways that have actually amplified their distress. This market-oriented approach to well-being showed up in my clinical office as clients "confessed" to me about not being able to follow through on a particular exercise, diet, or other "self-help" program they had read about, bemoaning their laziness and lack of self-discipline (on top of their depression and anxiety).

As a professor and a clinician, moving back and forth between classroom and therapy office, I am often bringing insights that I learn in one context to bear on the other. My students are certainly not my clients, but they have often arrived at college reflecting similar sources of depression and anxiety to those of my clients—including lack of success with products supposed to promote well-being. So I used the following questions as my guide as I designed the course: What are the consequences of this ever-proliferating market-oriented approach to well-being in modern Western culture? What are alternative ways of exploring this phenomenon?

My experience as a creative writer and literature professor guided me toward again adopting the particular interdisciplinary integrative approach to responding to these questions such as I had used before (and described in the 2018 *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* article on my trauma class that I referenced above). The poet Jane Hirschfield (2015), in her book of essays, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*, foregrounds the profound humanity in the experience of existential uncertainty and the ways in which "what we think of as 'art' . . . makes the encounter with the uncertain a thing to be sought . . . . That anxiety, grief, and the abysses of chaos can be lured into beauty and meaning, and into the freedom such transmutation itself brings, is no small part of literature's power" (p. 123). My own un-disciplined encounters with the integrations of art (literary, visual, performance, etc.) have consistently assisted me in encountering my clinical clients in their full humanity far more powerfully than the disciplinary study of psychological methods and theories ever has.

So, as I moved on in my planning process, I asked myself two more specific questions: What insights into, and possibilities for, well-being can an interdisciplinary integrative approach to the subject of locating well-being in catastrophe via the humanities and works of literature give us that focusing on discipline-specific psychological, sociological, economic, political, or medical approaches as presented in scholarly and popular discourses cannot? And how can this approach actually lend itself to new cognitive, emotional, and imaginative avenues for creating community and conversation in the midst of catastrophe that can foster well-being?

These questions, in fact, gave me the rest of the course title, which I realized needed to open with an active verb: *Imagining* Well-Being in a Cata-strophic Era. "Imagining" signaled that we would take a humanities-oriented perspective on the subject. And it also signaled that we would be taking an integrative approach because imagining is both a method of the fine arts and a phenomenon of our lived everyday experience as human beings. Of course, my familiarity with the literature of interdisciplinarity helped me think this through. As they introduce the distinctions among interdisciplinary work in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, Repko, Szostak,

and Buchberger (2020) claim that the interdisciplinary humanities tend to focus on "expression, effect, values, meaning, and how the things natural and social sciences study play out in human lives (i.e., lived experience)" (p. 44). Building on this distinction, William Newell wrote of the interdisciplinary humanities that it involves an integrative process that is experiential:

> it seeks to draw others (audiences, viewers, readers) into the integrative process and encourage them to participate in a shared integrative process . . . . Although scientific knowledge is disembodied and ideally purely cognitive, as is the integration of knowledge from different sciences by the interdisciplinarian, artistic expression is not only affective as well as (if not more so than) cognitive, but also potentially embodied, and so, too, can be its (partial) integration by the interdisciplinarian. It strikes me that the role of emotion in interdisciplinary integration . . . deserves more attention. (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012, p. 301)

To invite *imagining* would mean to invite active participation in the "shared integrative process" of attending to our own lived experience (emotional, embodied, cognitive, etc.) even as we examined that of others. I knew the best place to undertake the integrative interdisciplinary study of the phenomenon of well-being was in the context of the intersubjective space of a classroom with my students.

What I did not anticipate was that the context in which I actually would teach the course between the spring of 2020 and the spring of 2021 would place us in such an immediate relationship with catastrophe. Throughout the process of teaching this course, I watched my students' and my experiences and responses shift as I came to recognize the many kinds of "slow-violence" that were driving and amplifying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the slow-violence that has always underlain (and belied) the social contract of American democracy and the putative democratizing mission of U.S. foreign policy. My students and I became increasingly exhausted as we moved into the realization that we have always been living amid catastrophe, and that, indeed, these are not "unprecedented" times.

Our exhaustion also helped throw into bold relief a more familiar response to catastrophe that is cultivated not only in American culture as a whole, but uniquely, in the university classroom—that of self-conscious anxiety. At first, the experience of physical isolation from each other alongside news of the frequent eruptions of violence (e.g. George Floyd's murder, violent state-sanctioned responses to Black Lives Matter protests, the January 6th Capitol insurrection during fall term 2020) had all of us sharing the immediacy of catastrophe, a sharing that helped us to encounter one another and the phenomena we were studying more directly, despite or perhaps *because* of our physical distance from each other as we met over Zoom. In the relatively anonymized Zoom space, we seemed to be able to interact with one another with fewer assumptions regarding our subject positions; the anxiety regarding

our own implicated subjectivity seemed to recede, making space for something else to happen, particularly during the spring of 2020. Indeed, in the face of direct and immediate threats to our physical, psychological, and emotional well-being, diving into a shared exploration of catastrophe and our implicated subjectivity at a physical distance from each other gave us permission to show up increasingly in our full humanness, replete with contradiction, confusion, and, often, a stance of *not-knowing* that, instead of prompting self-consciousness or prescriptive reactions, catalyzed mutual curiosity.

However, this openness that we experienced throughout the spring and fall of 2020 did not last. By the spring of 2021, as more and more students left their cameras off during class, I felt their skepticism growing about locating well-being together in the context of the class and of this catastrophic pandemic in general. They retreated into well-defended arguments and stances that seemed to leave little room for curiosity about themselves or about each other. In many ways, this closing-off/shutting down during the third iteration of the course became just as important to my understanding of this class and the phenomena we were exploring as the openness had been during the first two terms.

I think this provides as good an introduction as any to the story that I will tell here now, in more detail, about teaching this course, specifically focusing on the first and third time I taught it, one year apart, because of the insights the dramatic contrast between the two experiences produced. So what follows here is a story about my students and me navigating catastrophe and coming to new understandings of and opportunities for well-being together—thanks not just to the content of the course but also to its integrative interdisciplinary pedagogy.

Teaching the Course and COVID-19

When COVID-19 sent us all home in early March 2020, we were three weeks away from the start of our spring term. Reeling from the poignancy of teaching a course about catastrophe and well-being that I developed in pre-COVID times, I decided to post on the course website a poem entitled "Pandemic" that Lynn Ungar (2020) wrote and circulated just as quarantine began.

> What if you thought of it
> as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
> the most sacred of times?
> Cease from travel.
> Cease from buying and selling.
> Give up, just for now,
> on trying to make the world

different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

I ended up opening the class on the first day of that term reading this poem out loud. I did not aim for a close reading. Rather, I just wanted to hear how students experienced the poem, emotionally and viscerally. The students that first spring said that reading it on the website and again hearing it made them cry. They were particularly moved by the repetition of the call to "reach out" and they talked about their sense of a commitment to a shared humanity in recognizing our mutual investment in one another's well-being. I ended up reading the poem out loud on the first day of the subsequent terms, as well, but by the spring of 2021, student responses had changed. Given the continuous disruptions due to political and social unrest, as well as the constant reminders of deeply entrenched hatred and hierarchy, on top of the pandemic, the dream of connection seemed all but extinguished in my students. Many of these later students resented the metaphor of the "wedding vow" that concludes the poem. They took offense at the tone that, in their reading, seemed to issue commands. An outlier student quietly suggested that it was written as a prayer, not a command. Much of the class balked at the "religiosity" of it. In other words, the third time I taught the course during spring of 2021, I encountered a group that seemed submerged in polemical rhetoric and ideological positions that manifested from day one in default responses that enabled fewer opportunities for authentic connection.

In all three iterations of the course I made an abrupt shift in disciplinary perspective right after reading the poem; I told them that we were going to leave the humanities—and a literary approach to the subject—behind briefly to journey into the social sciences for a week to look at the ways in which the phenomenon of well-being was being researched through the lens of modernist epistemologies and quantitative methods. I did this in order to underscore the difference in epistemologies between the social sciences and the humanities. I also started here because of the assumptions I was making about my students. One thing that remained consistent across the iterations of the course was the disciplinary orientation of the students; both spring 2020 and spring 2021 class rosters were weighted toward STEM majors. I believed that, given the epistemologies in which they were steeped as biology, computer science, and engineering majors, they would be especially compelled by a modernist quantitative approach to exploring the subject of well-being: that of positive psychology. I noticed my own disciplinary assumptions when that first group of students had responded so vulnerably to the poem. I was surprised that they had clearly been moved by metaphor. Even so, I made similar disciplinary assumptions when we embarked on the first section of the course entitled "Well-Being in the 21st-Century: Positive Psychology, Happiness Studies, and a Culture of Calibrations."

I had decided that I would open the course by examining the limitations of the approach of the sub-discipline of positive psychology to well-being with my students through two articles: one foundational and the other illustrative. The first is an introduction that Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi wrote for a special 2000 issue of *American Psychologist* that they edited and that introduced positive psychology to the broader field and argued for its novel approach to the study of human behavior. They wrote in their introductory essay,

> Positive psychology grew largely from the recognition of an imbalance in clinical psychology in its research focus on mental illness . . . . PP, instead, is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions. (p. 5)

Seligman's and Csikszentmihalyi's collection showcased a variety of examples and issued a call to action on the part of disciplinarians (both clinical and academic) to join in the work that de-emphasizes pathology and places its emphasis on happiness, subjective well-being ("what people think and how they feel about their lives" (p. 9)), and the fundamental disciplinary assumption that there are empirical measures for phenomena they identify as "optimal functioning."

The subfield of positive psychology has since inspired myriad journals, one of which is the *Journal of Happiness Studies* that describes itself thus:

> The peer reviewed *Journal of Happiness Studies* is devoted to scientific understanding of subjective well-being. Coverage includes both cognitive evaluations of life such as life-satisfaction, and affective enjoyment of life, such as mood level. In addition to contributions on appraisal of life-as-a-whole, the journal accepts papers on such life domains as job-satisfaction, and such life-aspects as the perceived meaning of life. *The Journal of Happiness Studies* provides a forum for two main traditions in happiness research: 1) speculative reflection on the good life, and 2) empirical investigation of subjective well-being . . . . The journal addresses the conceptualization, measurement, prevalence, explanation, evaluation, imagination and study of happiness.

The second disciplinary article I selected for my students to read was a more recent empirical study published in this journal; in this study, well-being is uncoupled from happiness, per se, and is instead presented as an outcome of a process that is, perhaps, less epistemologically fraught for this researcher: meaning-making that can be observed through self-reported thinking processes and behaviors. In this study, entitled "Prioritizing Meaning as a Pathway to Meaning in Life and Well-Being," positive psychologist Russo-Netzer (2018) found, through survey and statistical analysis that,

> The capability to prioritize meaningful activities in daily life appears to constitute a significant yet *intricate process* that requires not only intrinsic choice, but also *continuous reflection and examination . . . . Self-awareness* is thus vital in discerning personal values, *aligning daily choices of activities accordingly and refining such choices through detecting potential shifts of meaning.* Such an *ongoing process* enables individuals to shape and cultivate a sense of personal meaning....Through *actively organizing daily routines* to include meaningful activities, individuals can become aware of what is personally meaningful and of value to them, *consciously focus their intention and energies to invest in them*, and eventually contribute to their *well-being.* (p. 1887, emphasis added)

In other words, in this research the conclusion seemed to be that agentic, intentional, highly self-conscious practices will result in well-being.

In selecting these two articles and asking students to close read them in the second week, I wanted to engage students, in a limited way, in what Repko and Szostak (2017) lay out as the "integrated model of the interdisciplinary research process (IRP)" (p. 77). I developed a tool for critically reading these two journal articles that asked them to explore the assumptions that drove these researchers' questions, methodologies, and theories. This tool included a set of prompts for close reading the articles as well as a glossary and a schema that I adapted from Repko and Szostak's IRP to give students a very preliminary introduction to "developing adequacy in a discipline" and "analyzing the problem and evaluating insights" (pp. 147–212). See Appendix B.

I was also very aware that I was setting up positive psychology as a discipline-specific counterpoint in relatively stark contrast to the interdisciplinary humanities approach to studying well-being that we would be taking a little later in the course. I chose this subfield of positive psychology, to be frank, because of my own ambivalence about the implications that this research has had for clinical work done outside of the university. The assumptions, methods, findings, and conclusions of this research have directly informed "evidence-based" clinical practices of "cognitive behavioral therapy" (CBT), which are problem- and goal-oriented short-term therapy techniques that can help people find new ways to behave by closely monitoring and changing their thought patterns. On the one hand, I have found that attending to one's thought patterns (e.g., habitual loops of worry, paralyzing self-criticism, distorted projections onto others) can be a very useful practice to step clients through in a therapeutic context. On the other hand, the assumption that shifting thinking and behavioral patterns will remedy negative feeling and mood states is much more problematic. Offering clients "tools" and encouraging them to exert more mindfulness and personal agency in response to their feeling of despair often has the effect of amplifying that feeling.

Again, I made assumptions about how my students might react to relatively abstract questions I posed as to how we might explore well-being through the disciplinary lenses we would be using during the course. I assumed they would initially welcome the empiricist approach of positive psychology and would resist taking a critical look at Seligman's and Csikszentmihalyi's views that promised quantitative methods and measurable findings. I was immediately surprised and, again, called to recognize my own biases when I found the many STEM majors to be keen close-readers and abstract thinkers. The following example illustrates powerfully the ways in which many of these students exceeded my expectations, even drawing from their own disciplinary perspectives, including their experiences as empirical researchers, to question the disciplinary perspective of positive psychology. This was one engineering student's response to the Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi introduction that she posted on a discussion board:

> Seligman used the term well-being synonymously with "positive individuals" and "thriving communities." This, to me, seemed over-generalized. I believe that thriving communities aren't just composed of all positive and optimistic personalities. I think that it takes the entire spectrum to achieve this. In the case of engineering, it takes a positive attitude to drive the team forward and keep spirits high, but the pessimist of the bunch might be the one who questions everything and ultimately finds an issue, not because they want to find something wrong . . . . I also thought the idea of summing up the positive and negative events in a person's life to evaluate well-being as questionable and overly simplistic. It made me think of that trick

> question that asks if 10 pounds of feathers or 10 pounds of rocks is heavier. And I think this can be compared to people's life events and how the weight of each event impacts a person differently than any other.

And it was not just the STEM majors who pushed back; a sociology major gave specific voice to a collective distrust in positive psychology most of the students shared:

> They assert the necessity of applying the scientific method as an approach towards cultivating the "strongest qualities" towards a better quality of life . . . . Supporting this kind of argument suggests a problematic expectation that there exist more valuable lives than others.

I was reminded that twenty-first century students are well aware of the ways in which, in her words, "a hierarchy of human traits can come to dictate the expectations of society" and the dangerous implications these kinds of assumptions and research agendas can have for reinforcing systemic discrimination and hierarchization in and outside of academia.

Indeed, such critiques anticipated the next discipline-specific article I assigned in the course, a sociological one that demonstrates how this discourse of positive psychology has been widely adopted by popular culture because it is so operationalizable. This reading is a discourse analysis by professor of childhood studies Kate Cairns and sociologist Josee Johnston (2015) entitled "Choosing Health: Embodied Neoliberalism, Postfeminism, and the 'Do-Diet,'" in which the authors close-read wellness magazines (like *Real Simple* and *Living Well*), blogs, and lifestyle columns from *The New York Times*. The authors frame their analysis through a Foucauldian conception of power as circulating within and by self-governing individuals as opposed to power that is imposed by governing institutions. They draw the connection between self-disciplined subjects and neoliberalism, which they define as a "discursive context where market-culture is valorized, state responsibility is minimized, and individual responsibility is a priority" (p. 154). They find that individuals' everyday practices of self-regulation are fundamental to neoliberal governance that "operates *through* the embodied actions of free subjects—often by exercising choice in the market," adding that "neoliberalism also operates at the level of emotion, as structural problems are individualized as private burdens that are *felt* in everyday life" (p. 155). As we grappled with the theoretical context of this study, I showed my students the covers of magazines like *Real Simple* and *Well Being Journal* that promise to address everything from interpersonal relationships, to meditation, to clothing, to travel, to positive thinking- and body-practices, to healthy eating. I talked about the ways in which these kinds of popular culture texts participate in disciplining us into self-governance by "teaching" us how to eat, dress, and interact which each other. The promise for those who opt to engage these practices, as illustrated by the slim models

meditating and doing yoga against the backdrop of beautiful natural land-scapes, is a sense of well-being.

Without explicitly studying the phenomenon of well-being, Cairns and Johnston look at discourses of health and wellness in these publications that in particular frame food choices and eating/dieting practices "through a lens of empowerment and health rather than vanity and restriction" (abstract). They show how the emphasis of what they call the "do-diet" is on positive choices, body discipline, expert knowledge, and self-control, emphasis that students immediately recognized not only resonates with the discourse of positive psychology but also reinforces market-based ideologies that validate those who can perform "well-being" through complex consumer practices and attitudes (and, of course, exclude many who cannot afford to participate or whose bodies are not represented within these discourses).

The researchers found that the "'do-diet' remediates a tension at the heart of neoliberal consumer culture: namely, the tension between embodying discipline through dietary control and expressing freedom through consumer choice" (p. 153). In a series of focus group interviews, women described their practices of "healthy eating" as *making choices* versus restricting themselves; they underscored that these everyday eating choices required *significant effort and self-control*. And Cairns and Johnston call this process "*calibration*—a prac-tice wherein women manage their relationship to the extremes of self-control and consumer indulgence in an effort to perform middle-class femininities" (p. 154, emphasis added). They note that we are inundated with suggestions for "steps" we can take to achieve well-being in popular and consumer culture—and the implications of these steps reinforce neoliberal values of self-control, individual responsibility, and self-improvement through consumption. We are constantly being trained to *calibrate* our thoughts and behaviors, and, as a result, to become increasingly self-conscious and self-monitoring in the process. We measure ourselves not only against the models represented in these publications but also against each other. And not only does this amplify our anxiety but it also de-emphasizes the structural inequities that give only certain individuals access to these practices. Those who cannot participate are either rendered invisible or seen as un-disciplined (read unhealthy).

As we discussed this research, some of the humanities and social science majors in the class were grappling with the metaphor of "calibration," which is a method used in the natural and applied sciences. "Are the researchers using this metaphor just to claim that middle-class white women need to *balance* themselves in their self-presentation?" they asked. The engineering majors in the class explained that calibrating an instrument of measurement means comparing it to a "known standard" in order to achieve accuracy or uniformity in experimentation; thus, to "calibrate" the tool is to adjust or tune it to bring it into alignment with this standard. One student added, "Of

course, calibration is achieved by determining *what counts as* the standard for measuring." In other words, the standard itself is arbitrary; what is important is maintaining alignment with or accuracy in comparison with this standard in order to achieve uniformity in measurement.

I told my students that what they were doing in this discussion was, in fact, the work of integrative interdisciplinary analysis, specifically finding common ground between two different disciplinary approaches. Making explicit what Cairns and Johnston were doing when they used "calibration" as a metaphor, my students were redefining and extending a method from the natural and applied sciences to apply to this sociological discourse analysis. I then invited my students to see how they could, in fact, build on the integrative analysis by asking them to share examples that they found in their own lives of "calibration culture." I provided them with a "padlet" as a flexible medium for posting links to websites, images, video, music clips, etc. so that we could encounter these examples directly.

While some students merely reiterated Cairns' and Johnston's analysis by posting examples of messages promoting "healthy eating" to women (with photos of a very specific body standard), many others opened up the field and applied the metaphor to very different contexts and cultural sites. For example, one student posted an image of the Nike "swoosh" and the words "Just Do It" which he close-read in a way that defamiliarized what has become so iconic as to be nearly invisible in American culture:

> Nike's motto calibrates individuals to believe that they are capable of doing anything they set their mind to. . . . However, this notion, similar to the "do-diet," does nothing more than rephrase a belief that has already been problematic. As the do-diet still advocates for fat anxiety, Nike's "just do it" creates anxiety sourced around laziness and failure. The calibration is set with a positive psychological background to do physical things to the best of our ability. However, it does not acknowledge failure or the need to prioritize safety as an option – and thus is driven by and drives anxiety.

Another student focused on the myriad pre-structured "gratitude journals" that bookstores perch on the selves between daily planners and blank Moleskine notebooks. She reflected on the format and prompts in these journals as

> a way to take control of one's thoughts and emotions. . . . Society often tells us we should keep our emotions in check, not be too emotional or too detached. . . . These journals are a consumer-based positive psychology method in which you remind yourself daily for things and people you are grateful for. It's meant to steer away from negative thoughts and emotions and focus on the positives. . . . but as [another student] said in our last class discussion, we have to go through our feelings of sadness and anxiety, not around them.

In a final example, a student described the pressure to calibrate in terms of a "being woke but not being an SJW" scale:

> Especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, it is so critical for young people to be active politically. Immediately following the murder of George Floyd, there was a lot of criticism on social media of people who were posting other content as if nothing had happened. At the same time, there always feels like a lot of pressure to not be too "uptight" or you'll be labeled a "Social Justice Warrior."

As students commented on each other's posts, the engineering majors pushed us further into our integrative analysis. One of them said that engineers only calibrate their tools "as needed—usually just in the beginning of a project." In fact, it is not a "best-practice" to continuously recalibrate. However, what he was seeing through our work on the padlet was that "calibration culture" is actually a process of constant recalibration. Another student who was majoring in international studies added that maybe we could connect this process to the Marxist theory of the cycle of capitalism and continuous accumulation through the re-production of need. The sociology major made a connection between her colleague's Marxist analysis and her understanding of the "social gaze." As I listened, I furiously wrote down the concepts and theories they were exploring on the Zoom whiteboard. I told them that they were engaging in the interdisciplinary research method of finding common ground. And, in doing so, they had also connected the concept of "calibration culture" back to the assumptions and methods of positive psychology, giving them an even deeper understanding of the limitations and implications of this approach to studying "well-being," which, we had realized through this process, had ceased to look like well-being at all.

I offer such a detailed description of this process because this padlet assignment became the first in which I started noting the shifts in tone, attention, and energy level from the first time I taught the course in spring of 2020 to the last in spring of 2021. It is, of course, difficult to come to clear conclusions about the impact of the ongoing pandemic and its resonance in this class over time based on only three groups of students taught in the course of year. However, I have been struck by the fact that, one year into the pandemic, my students' participation in the padlet had become perfunctory; it lacked any of the creative energy that the first group of students displayed not only in their posts but also in their excitement in exploring the metaphor of calibration. Almost all of the final group of students simply reiterated Cairns' and Johnston's research by producing additional examples of the "do-diet" to focus on eating and body image standards.

Two outliers in this final group, by contrast, began an analysis of how "calibration culture" manifests in their lives and then seemed to enact a resistance, not only to "calibration culture" but to the assignment itself. As an

example, one of them, who titled her post "Preferring/Requiring Authenticity," underscored the false "choices" that Cairns and Johnston describe and then wrote,

> Choice as a source of empowerment looks different to me these days; it takes into consideration my whole being: mind, body, and spirit . . . . I am learning to give myself grace, daily, remembering that I am a complex being requiring different things at different times. Tonight, for instance, I required bourbon in all its forms. I think I've successfully overcome attempts at calibration, at least for now.

The other student wrote about "going off the grid" instead of calibrating her social media use to an "acceptable balance"; she now only uses the internet for academic-related research.

I am not suggesting that these students were signaling an escape from the Foucauldian gaze of "calibration culture," but, instead, want to note how anomalous their posts were in a sea of what felt like more lackluster responses. Were they exceptions that proved a rule? And, if so, what rule did they prove? And what standard had I myself posited a year into the pandemic to which I was calibrating the impact of this course and/or the students' engagement?

These spring 2021 students were just as weary of the pandemic and the other catastrophes we had been living through as I was. And they were just as critical of the deployment of the word "unprecedented." But by the middle of the term and toward the end of the 2020–2021 academic year as a whole, I realized that I needed to work as hard as I could to repurpose the word in the context of the class itself. I wanted us to aim towards something akin to what one of the two anomalous posts called for (without the bourbon): to "take into consideration [our] whole being[s]: mind, body, and spirit . . . . to give [ourselves] grace, daily, remembering that [we are] complex being[s] requiring different things at different times." In short, I wanted us to aim for something truly unprecedented to happen in our class. I wanted to break the rules, to throw out my reliance on explicit or implicit "known standards," even in terms of my own expectations for what authentic engagement in the class could look like.

Happily, I remembered that interdisciplinary teaching in the humanities, which is where I dwell, is an invitation, as Newell (2012) reminded us, "to participate in a shared integrative process" (p. 301). I realized by the third week of that spring term in 2021 that I did *not* in fact need "to work as hard as I could" to do something "unprecedented" because our approach to the subject of well-being in a catastrophic era *through* the literary texts we were about to read would open up the field: the field of our encounters with each other, with ourselves, and with our own imaginations. The experience would just feel different than it had with the previous classes.

The Literary Texts and the Lived Experiences of My Students

I wanted my students to understand that positive psychology and popular culture produce mutually reinforcing *prescriptive* discourses that may, in fact, *prevent* us from paying attention to lived experiences of well-being that we can and do encounter even in the most extreme conditions of potential and real disruption on individual and societal scales. An approach to exploring well-being through the humanities, by contrast, I told them, would engage us in the work of collaborative imagining, in contrast with calibrating. Invoking Newell's call to engage in a "shared integrative process," I told them that we would approach the literature not only through close-reading but also through paying attention to what the texts evoked in us, thus attending to our lived (emotional, embodied, as well as cognitive) experiencing.

I told my students that I had chosen the literary texts for this course two years before because, through very different narrative forms and contexts, they give us windows into some of the lived ways in which humans register, communicate, and navigate fear of catastrophic change in the everyday. I explained that these novels imagine and record dramatic reversals, sudden ends, disruption, destruction, or displacement—often as manifested in various experiences of *homelessness* (exile, dislocation, refugee-ism, a sense of being estranged or a stranger, etc.)—and, at the same time, locate a sense of *well-being* in the midst of such upheaval. In the twenty-first century, homelessness seems an even more pervasive and far-reaching literary trope than at any other time throughout history, seen through narratives of forced migration and immigration as well as post-industrial labor exigencies of constant relocation in addition to individual experiences of alienation and anxiety. And yet, these narratives also reflect experiences of meaningful human connectedness and, indeed, a sense of finding oneself "at home" in the world, enjoying a sense of well-being, however momentarily. I told them that literary texts can call us into recognition of a shared human experience and thereby teach us to foster such connection, even with those who seem most strange to and estranged from us. Literary texts ask readers to witness—which means to be deeply attentive to the characters and the contexts they experience. And I told them I believe that the work of literature can, thus, nurture in readers a new kind of attentiveness to ourselves and to others in our own lives.

The first novel students read after a couple of weeks of grappling with positive psychology and "calibration culture" was Aimee Bender's (2000) *An Invisible Sign of My Own.* The novel's narrator—middle-class, white, American Mona Gray—lives a life prescribed by her obsessive fear of her father's mortality (really, mortality, in general) and by the compulsive rituals she uses to find order in a world that she experiences as confusing and threatening. The confining rituals with which she navigates her internal world are the same

she uses to face the everydayness of her small U.S. hometown in an unnamed landlocked landscape that, at age twenty, she has never left.

The novel opens with a Prologue in which Mona recounts the bedtime story her father told her on her tenth birthday about a kingdom of people who discover the secret of eternal life. Of course, one unintended consequence of this gift is overcrowding. So the king rules that every family must select one member to be executed to alleviate the space problem for the good of the community. One family, resistant to this idea, elects to have each member sever a body part instead—reasoning that the sum of the parts will be equivalent to a whole person. The king agrees, thus making the act of amputation a controlling metaphor of the whole novel (pp. 1–4). This metaphor opens the section immediately following the Prologue when Mona states, "On my twentieth birthday, I bought myself an ax" (p. 7). And thus we are introduced into Mona Gray's world—in which we will be immersed throughout the rest of this first-person narrative.

Coincident with Mona turning ten (and the traumatizing choice in bedtime stories), her father had fallen ill with an undiagnosed kind of melancholy that had locked her, her mother, and father into a kind of collective gray inertia for the next ten years. His dis-ease had also precipitated Mona's penchant for quitting: quitting everything—running, piano playing, desserts, relationships, sex, desire. "It's a fine art, when you think about it," she says. "To quit well requires an intuitive sense of beauty; you have to feel the moment of turn, right when desire makes an appearance, here is the instant to be severed, whack" (p. 9). The only things that Mona does not quit are her compulsion to knock on wood and her obsession with numbers in ritualized attempts to stave off her father's mortality and, indeed, death in general.

As readers we are immersed in Mona's inner cogitations throughout the whole novel. Students notice early on that, while other characters interact and speak with Mona, there are no quotation marks, a style that amplifies the insularity of this perspective. Students across all three classes quickly worked to diagnose her (OCD, major depression, anxiety, autistic spectrum disorder, they speculated) and, in so doing, distanced themselves from her, even if she felt familiar to them. Many of them recognized some of her rituals and thought patterns. Others said they felt "put off" by her rigidity. I asked them to attend to their own affective response to this character and suggested that by diagnosing her, they wanted to fix her within a category, in relationship to a "known standard" of "normal." I invited them, instead, just to notice, describe, be curious.

Mona's project to stave off death isolates her, just as it isolates her father; she sees him lost in his own gray world of stasis, fear of death, and fear of living. In one scene she stands outside her parents' house and thinks: "I could guess where he was inside. In front of the television, half-watching, taking note of everything living inside his skin. Gallbladder? Check. Liver? Check.

Heartbeat? Check. Brain? ABCDEFG . . . Check" (p. 75). She imagines him not only calibrating his body parts as an engineer might calibrate different mechanisms in a complex machine, but also enacting a kind of psychic amputation as he severs selfhood from his body's component parts.

She knows this ritual well; "I used to think death might be hidden somewhere on our bodies . . . If you knew where to look, you could find it" (p. 74). At age twenty, she believes that she has special access to the signs that one's time is up, and, thus, if she can discover and correctly read the signs, she can prevent a death. It is all up to her.

After her mother beseeches her to move away and claim her own life, she rents an apartment around the corner from her parents and takes a job as the local elementary school's math teacher, becoming particularly attached to the 2nd grade class and specifically to one student, Lisa Venus, whose mother is dying of cancer.

It is Lisa Venus's imminent loss that pulls Mona out of her own fruitless attempt to keep her father company in his self-isolation. In the end of the novel, Lisa finds Mona in the teacher's lounge and tries to keep her company by mimicking Mona's wood-knocking tics, making visible what Mona has always assumed was the "invisible sign of her own" mechanism for protecting herself and others against the forces of what has felt like a chaotic mortal existence. When Lisa's knocking turns self-destructive and she bashes her head into the wall, Mona steps outside of her insularity to save the child.

> I kept holding her as tight as I could, fierce as a vice, and she said . . . I wanted to bleed all over the carpet, I want to have chemotherapy, I want to have no hair, I want to be in the hospital too, she's going to have to die all by herself . . . and it was my turn to talk but I kept holding her close and I had nothing to say . . . No matter how many times she kept her mother company, it was clear who was leaving, and who was staying put. (p. 193)

Mona holding Lisa has the added effect of making Mona visible to herself. And it initiates a profound decision when Mona visits her dad and tells him quietly, "I'm sorry . . . but I don't think I can keep you company anymore" (p. 229).

On the final page of the novel, Mona retells the opening bedtime story to Lisa Venus—but with an important difference. Rather than sacrificing a body part for the family, the daughter of the family announces her decision to move away from the kingdom of eternal life. She invites others to join her and when they hesitate, she simply says, "Bye . . . . I'll be next town over" and walks off into the bright sunshine (p. 242).

I go into such detail here because I think that the arc of this novel, from the opening Prologue to Mona's revised fairy tale in the end, narrativizes a complex process that phenomenological philosopher Hans Georg-Gadamer (1993) identifies as he unpacks the profound paradox of death anxiety in his reading of the myth of *Prometheus Bound* as ultimately a catalyst for imagination and

liberation (rather than paralysis). Midway through reading *An Invisible Sign of My Own,* I introduce this paradox when I give my students excerpts from *The Enigma of Health,* a series of essays based on talks that Gadamer delivered on the dehumanizing impact of modern medicine and its ever-increasing and dis-integrating specializations. In it he writes,

> [the myth of *Prometheus Bound*] signifies the forgetting of death so that [man] no longer has to reckon with it. And yet . . . this forgetting of death is never a real forgetting or overcoming but rather constitutes life itself. Thus the whole investigative genius of man presses forward into an incalculable future, or rather, . . . into the experience of transcendence . . . . it is through . . . the possession of language that a person is able to think something [hold awareness of mortality] and at the same time hold certain possibilities open. (p. 157)

In other words, it is our genuine encounter with our mortality—with the clear awareness that we are "beings onto death"—and, simultaneously, our ability to imagine and move toward a future in spite of this awareness that exemplifies and fosters our well-being. Our active awareness of our existential condition, in fact, contrasts with the anxiety that "calibration culture" amplifies in its emphasis on achieving certain standards of health through specific practices.

Gadamer contrasts *existential* anxiety with the anxiety that is born out of the prescriptive discourses that modern science produces to achieve or maintain health, discourses that have amplified humans' need for security, mastery, and control, specifically over death. Gadamer argues that modern scientific prioritization of "The prolongation of life finally becomes a prolongation of death and a fading away of the experience of self" (p. 62). My students notice this same pull toward security, mastery, and control in the discourses of *Well-Being* and other popular magazines reflective of the social sciences that foster the kind of obsessive self-monitoring/calibration that Mona's dad engages in (gluten-free: check; requisite kale intake: check; daily smile quotient: check).

Gadamer's caution in response to modern science and medicine recalls the father's opening fairy tale that values immortality above all else—a view that, fundamentally, prevents us from engaging us in the present. The young Mona quits her own life to save her father; her experience of self is rigid, fearful, self-sacrificial. However, in the end of the novel when she retells the fairy tale to Lisa, we are left at the threshold of the incalculable future that Gadamer describes as the necessary step to transcendence—diametrically opposed to the obsessive calibrations by which Mona has tried to order her life and fend off death throughout the novel. Townspeople in Mona's version of the fairy tale watched "as the [daughter and several others] walked straight into death, and they watched as long as they could" until they disappeared from view

over the horizon and they "could see nothing more than an empty yellow hill rolling out in front of them like a carpet of sunlit water." As my students and I all sat in the power of the daughter's choice to "[walk] straight into death," I asked "what other choice do we have!?" maybe a little too jovially.

Throughout our reading of the novel in all three classes, I had to push against my students' strong urges to contain the characters not only within diagnoses but also within other kinds of precedents, known standards, and rules of behavior. I made it clear early on that continuing to diagnose Mona would go over about as well as saying that our pandemic was "unprecedented."

This was another juncture in the course that marked, for me, the differences between the first class and the third class. The first class took to heart the ways in which diagnosis can foreclose on listening to and encountering others in their full humanness. They applied this consideration to the "grayness" surrounding Mona's family and the ways in which the family fades and becomes isolated from the community. They talked about how Mona's loneliness prompts her connection to Lisa Venus as a way to re-parent herself.

By contrast, the students in the third class held on tightly to diagnosis. After I told them to stop diagnosing Mona, many of them turned their attention to Mona's father's "cancer" and her grief over her impending orphan-hood. I entreated them to notice that, in fact, the problem was that he does *not* have a cancer diagnosis, or any other diagnosis. And still, they inserted "terminal illness" into every description of her father. Lisa Venus, who is the imminent orphan in the novel, wakes Mona up to the fact that he is not actively dying, but is paralyzed with death anxiety.

And there is another kind of wake-up call in this novel that was, in fact, even more troubling for this third group of students: the wake-up call of desire as Mona works to manage her interactions with the new science teacher at her school. If Mona is all about order, Benjamin Smith represents chaos as he teaches human biology by assigning students to role-play the symptoms of viruses and diseases. (Mona finds students lying in the halls of the school simulating scurvy and tuberculosis.) Despite her horror and anger, she is drawn to Benjamin and his embodied and experiential pedagogy (which, despite her best intentions, she actually shares as she invites students to find numbers in the materials of their lived worlds: Lisa's mother's IV tubing becomes a zero; a war hero's amputated leg that has been preserved becomes a number one). Midway through the novel Benjamin and Mona go out on a date and return to her apartment, and as they begin kissing each other, Mona extinguishes her rising desire when she excuses herself to go to the bathroom. "I was blooming out of control, and the melting inside was unbearable, and I took myself away." The nature of her retreat is, at first, unapparent to Benjamin. But the reader knows what is coming based on her earlier description of her penchant for the "fine art" of quitting "right when desire makes an appearance" (p. 9).

> I slipped into the bathroom and shut the door and locked it and confronted
> my face—pink, eyes bluer than normal. Took the bar of soap right into my
> hands . . . . My friend, soap, that small ball of ruin . . . . I brought the whole
> bar up to my lips and rolled it halfway inside my mouth, sucking on the
> white curves, lolling the smoothness over my tongue, drinking the water
> off the white: I ran it over my mouth, lathered my lips, and I licked the
> froth off again and again, licked the smooth curve of the bar, reglaze, relick,
> swallowing it down, forcing the upset, feeling my stomach unravel. (p. 145)

When she returns to Benjamin, after having successfully expended her erotic
energy on the soap, "[her] body went limp and dead." Benjamin—who has
prompted his students to fake illness and near death—knows an "act" when
he sees it, and he names it. "No, he said. This part is acting class—I give you
an A for acting class. But the rest was real. This stuff, he said, this stuff about
you I don't like at all . . . . I was here, remember?" (p. 147). And even though
we continue to see Benjamin through Mona's narration, his insistence on his
own reality and Mona's "real" connection to another provides readers one of
the first potential conduits to a perspective outside of Mona's "own."

In the end of the novel, Mona's wake-up call to the otherness of Lisa
Venus, as well as her decision to let go of her anxious surveillance of her father,
catalyzes her return to Benjamin and her own active turning toward the real.
When she invites him on a second date, she also asks him for an important
favor: "I took a breath and told Benjamin the science teacher that next time, if
there ever was a next time, if I said I was going to the bathroom, he shouldn't
let me go . . . . I felt like I was praying. He said: Ms. Gray, I am not your bath-
room monitor. I smiled a little at that. I know, I said. You're right, I said. But
just once, I said." In fact, in one of the final scenes in the novel, Benjamin has
to enforce his appointed role as bathroom monitor not just once but over and
over. In the beginning of the scene, just as desire makes an appearance, Mona,
"tentatively, terrified," says she has to go to the bathroom.

> He stops kissing me and looks straight at me and his teeth are white in the
> darkness. There is a long pause and I am waiting, and my hope is eighty
> airplanes, poised on the runway, ready for takeoff: please, please, please,
> please. And then he smiles. No, he says. As soon as he says it my eyes fill
> up, just like that, the gratitude is that fast and that immediate. (p. 220)

The specificity of the erotic in this scene is played out as Benjamin refuses to
let Mona go to the bathroom, holding her down in her bed.

And this is where many of the students in my third class took up Mona's
now-former habit and "quit." "This feels like a rape scene," they said. I was
alarmed, particularly because the first class, in reading this scene, were curious
about it even as they wondered if Bender would have chosen to write a scene
like this in a #MeToo era. The third class were not curious; instead they were
incensed. I urged them to close read the complexity in Mona's gratitude and

hope—indeed, the complexity in inviting another in as she thinks, "I can feel the room shift, the whole room is keeping us, and I ask him [if I can go to the bathroom] again because I can, because I am starting to have the smallest, most precious glimmer of trust [that he won't let me]" (p. 221). I told my students, like Lisa Venus, she needs another to see her and to hold her tightly in the real. She wakes later in the night next to Benjamin and to the reality of her existential condition; "I'm still here . . . I have been here the whole time, haven't I, and the broom thought that finally sweeps me away is that I am young. I am younger. I am supposed to outlive them both" (p. 225). While, as readers, we "have been here the whole time" in Mona's insular world, she claims a new presence for herself in this moment; she sets her parents free to their own existential condition as she sets us free to imagine an unknown and unprescribed future for her.

I became increasingly aware, as I watched my students in that third class struggle with this scene and the ending of the novel, of the insularity that had been forced upon them over the past year as they had attended class on Zoom and feared their physical proximity with another—as well as their own uncertain futures.

I wondered about how, in this protracted state of isolation, these students could access their own curiosity and sense of freedom and possibility. While considering the differences between the two responses of the two classes as I worked on this article, I eagerly read an essay entitled "The Ballad of Sexual Optimism," by cultural critic, feminist, and queer theorist Maggie Nelson (2021) the week that her new book *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* came out. In it she writes about desire in terms of "the fundamental unknowability of ourselves and each other . . . . which is part of what makes [sexual experience] worthwhile" (p. 78). And it is part of what makes our interpersonal connections, in general, worthwhile. Desire makes us vulnerable, and it is also a source of our power. Indeed, Mona emerges vividly from her rigid insularity in the novel when she holds eight-year-old Lisa Venus in a "vice grip" to protect her from (while witnessing) her uncontainable grief. And this power also manifests in Mona asking Benjamin to hold her down because she trusts him enough to see her as real: a whole person. This is an example, in Maggie Nelson's framing, "of a different kind of freedom drive—one that longs to be self-forgetful, incautious, overwhelmed" (p. 95). And Mona's desire in this scene opens her up to a new kind of learning; she is making her signs visible and shared or co-created. They are no longer just "her own." This moment also resonates with Gadamer's (1993) claim that "Well-being shows itself when we are open to new things, ready to embark on new enterprises and forgetful of ourselves" (p. 112). Again, this self-forgetting that both writers invoke is not a self-abandonment, but an opening up to new possibilities for a self-in-relation to the world that is not mediated by anxious calibrations.

I know enough to know that encountering a scene like the one between Benjamin and Mona likely activates thirty different responses in a class of thirty students—some of them borne out of trauma. And I do not diminish the impact that a history of sexual trauma, in particular, could have on a student's encounter with this scene. But I did continue to invite students to see Mona in her own wholeness and separateness from their own experience—in the hopes that this might offer them conduits to new freedom for themselves as well.

When we moved into the second novel of the quarter (a novel that is about a pandemic, but one that is also about connection and community), I felt wary with this third class; not only had they had difficulty fostering curiosity about Mona's journey, but they also seemed relatively disconnected from one another. By this time, we were also a full year into the pandemic, and if *An Invisible Sign of My Own* foregrounds the rigid repression of death anxiety, Emily St. John Mandel's (2014) novel *Station Eleven* evokes just that anxiety, situating the certainty of death and the real possibility of human species extinction center stage. The first class, the one that had been so inspired by Ungar's prayer for a collective "reaching out," had been compelled by Mona's waking up to the intersubjectivity of well-being. They had also been deeply moved and consoled by the experience of this second novel. What would happen this time around, with this third class that seemed collectively resistant to inviting their own and each other's full humanness into the space of the class? Would foregrounding pandemic in our literary exploration as well as in our lives foreclose on our shared imagining altogether?

Mandel's *Station Eleven* opens at the advent of catastrophe in the form of a world-wide pandemic that kills 99% of the population indiscriminately. The novel moves back and forth in time from various moments in pre-collapse North American culture to the present-time of the novel, which is twenty-years post-pandemic onset. In this present time, we follow various communities and individuals navigating this world without electricity, internet, cars, airplanes, etc. including a Traveling Symphony that announces itself as it travels the landscape performing concerts and Shakespearean plays with a sign on the side of their caravan that reads "Because survival is insufficient" (p. 58).

The Traveling Symphony is directly contrasted with and hunted by a dangerous cult led by a ruthless "prophet." At the onset of the pandemic we see him, as a child, being read to obsessively by his panicky mother from the Book of Revelations (again, not the best choice in bedtime stories—particularly in the midst of pandemic). This ominous foreshadowing also helps explain the source of the prophet's murderous theology; he sees himself as "chosen" by divine providence—and thus constructs himself as immortal and justified in enslaving others for his own bidding, and killing those who resist or attempt to flee. The prophet and his followers are represented as antithetical to the artists and their role as an enlivening force; unlike the Traveling Symphony, this cult manifests a failure of the life-sustaining imagination. When

the symphony unwittingly arrives in the cult's settlement and performs *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a play, significantly, that foregrounds the power of the imagination), the prophet cuts off the standing ovation (and the tears of an audience member) as he stands and states,

> "My people . . . We are blessed to have these musicians and actors in our midst today". . . . "We have been blessed," he said, "in so many ways, have we not? We are blessed most of all in being alive today. We must ask ourselves, 'Why? Why we were spared?'" He was silent for a moment, scanning the Symphony and the assembled crowd, but no one responded. "I submit," the prophet said, "that everything that has ever happened on this earth has happened for a reason." (p. 59)

The prophet delivers a dangerous cliché that makes the community immediately recognizable as a "doomsday cult" and that threatens to subsume the meaning of the Symphony and the art it offers—a signal to the Symphony's leader to pack up immediately and leave.

The Traveling Symphony, in stark contrast to the prophet and his followers, provides one of several beacons of hope in this devastated world because of its commitment to community and creativity. The conductor—certainly not a cult figurehead—remains unnamed, but she is represented as a clear-headed leader who values the non-hierarchical well-being of the group as a whole while also recognizing them as a set of unique individuals playing specific roles in the symphony; they are each named for their instrument and seat in the orchestra (second violin, fourth guitar, third cello, etc.). The sum of the parts is great. But so too is the individuality of each player.

Now, lest we worry that Mandel is copping out by positing a utopian artist commune as the ideal configuration for humanity in a post-pandemic world, we learn early on that as in any human community living and traveling in close-quarters, things are not always easy: "Someone had written 'Sartre: Hell is other people' in pen inside one of the other caravans, and someone else had scratched out 'other people' and substituted 'flutes'" (pp. 47–48). At the same time, we learn that "what made it bearable were the friendships, of course, the camaraderie and the music and the Shakespeare, the moments of transcendent beauty and joy" (p. 47). Shortly after this description, we are immersed in the fairyland of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* played at "Twilight in the altered world" (p. 57). The performance, described before we even see the prophet, captures the imagination and the emotions of the cult members who sit in rapt attention in the audience. In fact, the Symphony enables experiences of well-being through art, even in the context of the most profound catastrophe: "What was lost in the collapse: almost everything, almost everyone, but there is still such beauty" (p. 57).

Again, the aim of this novel is not to romanticize or aestheticize catastrophe. Rather, it is to suggest an alternative to a denial or defense against death,

in the face of catastrophe (indeed, in the very age in which we are living). And, again, as I had brought Gadamer's phenomenology of death anxiety into conversation with our discussion of *Invisible Sign of My Own,* I brought another phenomenological approach into our conversations about *Station Eleven.* As we neared the end of the novel, students read Les Todres and Kate Galvin's (2018) existential-phenomenological theory of well-being, which they describe as a state of "dwelling-mobility." Todres and Galvin draw from Heidegger's discussion of existential homelessness that humans experience when they face vulnerability and mortality. In this experience, they say, we become unmoored from a sense of at-homeness that is a taken-for-granted everydayness (during which we are not directly facing our mortality), or what Heidegger calls "numbing comfort" (p. 86)). But they argue that rather than paralyzing us with terror, this recognition of our existential homelessness, or

> facing this 'not being at home' through an anxiety provoking experience [for example pandemic, illness, war, displacement, catastrophe] can often open up a path of movement; and this can provide an energizing potential that can itself be felt as well-being. (p. 86)

This movement that they describe is not an anxious flight from facing our existential condition; rather, it realizes the "ontological possibilities of *authentic mobility* . . . . a creative restlessness in which we are called into our future possibilities*" (emphasis added). In turn, this authentic mobility opens up a path toward an authentic homecoming. Thus "[h]omelessness paradoxically provides an important motivation for the quest to seek the experience of homecoming . . . [to] a peaceful attunement to existence," an existence including the vulnerabilities of our mortality (p. 86). Todres and Galvin note,

> One can come to dwelling in many ways such as sadness, suffering, concern, attentiveness, acceptance, relaxation, or patience . . . . It is a form of being grounded in the present moment, supported by a past that is arriving and the openness of a future that is calling. (p. 87)

In other words, well-being is not contingent upon "positive" subjective feelings of pleasure or happiness. And it is, notably, not yielded by a trajectory of self-improvement. Instead, existential well-being finds meaning in the ways in which we live simultaneously in relationship with our past, in our present, and toward our future.

Again, like Gadamer's notion of humans' imaginative transcendence in the face of mortality, Todres' and Galvin's theory underscores an essential paradox: "In coming home to what 'is there,' there is not necessarily an eradication of suffering, pain and the existential vicissitudes of life" (p. 87). Instead, "there is a felt quality to 'making room for' and 'letting be-ness' that constitutes a kind of peace" while, at the same time, "being called into the novelty of open horizons" (p. 88). This dwelling-mobility of existential well-being is manifested and epitomized in the Traveling Symphony that not only creates

"such beauty" in the "twilight of the altered world," but fosters the wholeness of individuals within a human community whose members watch out for each other in the most profound manifestation of the social contract.

Station Eleven ends with the violent death of the character who is the antithesis to existential well-being, the prophet. (One of the Symphony members kills him in self-defense and in defense of her beloved fellow musicians.) And we look out on the horizon through the perspective of another character who has created a Museum of Civilization in which he collects artifacts of the pre-pandemic world. After his imagination is reignited by learning that a nearby community has rediscovered electricity, he thinks,

> is it possible that there are ships setting out? If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain. If nothing else, it's pleasant to consider the possibility. He likes the thought of ships moving over the water, toward another world just out of sight. (pp. 332–333)

Like the daughter in the end of Mona's story, in the end of *Station Eleven*, The Museum of Civilization curator gazes out over a similarly uncertain horizon. As he reflects on his pre-pandemic career in corporate culture as a "high-functioning sleepwalker" (p. 163), that self is set in sharp contrast with his presence to himself and others as the repository of memory and perspective. And his perspective manifests existential well-being or dwelling-mobility as he looks outward.

Gadamer argues that well-being requires this kind of self-forgetting (a relinquishing of anxious calibrations and attempts at control that situate ourselves and our mere survival at all costs at the center of existence); instead, he claims, "we should consider it a universal responsibility of human beings to learn to turn this capacity for directing our attention away from ourselves—this permanent orientation towards new possibilities, towards the unknown, towards new ventures—back in the direction of the vast, balance-sustaining rhythm of the natural order" (p. 85). Significantly, the post-pandemic landscape of *Station Eleven* has not been decimated by nuclear fallout. In fact, we encounter a landscape of the upper mid-west and Canada in which nature is taking over, a phenomenon that has the effect of placing limits on the Promethean reach of individual characters and forcing them to turn toward each other to work in more sustainable and collaborative rhythms.

As we began reading this novel about a world-wide pandemic during each of the three terms in quarantine, I felt a collective bracing; students reported that they avoided doing their reading at night because it gave them bad dreams. Soon, however, they described feeling some relief that "our pandemic" was not nearly as bad as the one in the novel. "We still have electricity; we can still be connected to each other through the internet and Zoom," they said.

Still, during the spring of 2021 I needed to attend to the fact that every day it seemed as if fewer and fewer students were turning their cameras on—an experience all my colleagues were having, as well. So, in response to their retreat from engagement, I decided to break the class up into smaller groups of ten. Over three class periods, I met with one group at a time and sat back in silence to let them conduct the conversation about the section of the novel they had been assigned to read for the day. I had assumed that the conversations would last for about one hour, I would sum up what I had heard, and then I would let them go for the day.

Instead, the conversations lasted for the full two hours—during which time students (all with their cameras on) opened with quotations they wanted to close-read together, raised follow-up questions in response to others' analyses and ideas, and asked specific group members to speak from their own disciplinary perspectives. A theater major spoke at length about Shakespeare and the history of traveling acting troupes; a physics major talked about the theory of parallel universes that one character meditates on—envisioning a universe in which the pandemic has not occurred—and spoke about how this not only disrupts the prophet's providential narrative but also invites the reader (who is living in the parallel universe) to engage with the novel more deeply. And they spoke to each other from their lived perspectives. One Vietnamese-American student, whose grandmother was a refugee to the United States after the Vietnam War, talked about how her Vietnamese relatives are only now beginning to move through the trauma of the war fifty years later. She connected this family history to the different relationships that the characters in the novel had to the world before the pandemic, to memory, and to trauma, based on their ages (some of the characters were born after the collapse but into a legacy of collective trauma). In her reflections she integrated the novel, her grandmother's perspective, and her observations on the present moment:

> Something that seems to contribute to one's well-being is the hope that the future will get better/improve from this tragedy. However, because this pandemic has been traumatizing for all of us, we are wishing for things to go back to what the world was like before. The reason why we don't wish for an improved situation, but rather to go back to how things were, is trauma makes it difficult for us to envision a hopeful future for ourselves, so the only vision we can see that may comfort ourselves is the vision of the past. But the problem with this is we often want to move past trauma way too quickly without really reflecting on how detrimental this is to us in our coping.

This comment slowed the group down to reflect on the importance of attending to this moment of our pandemic for themselves, as they watched each of the characters in the novel make different meanings of their experience.

In fact, the students talked about how they had come to experience the novel, despite the frightening events, as a character-driven (versus a

plot-driven) novel. At first, they had found themselves wanting to know how it was all going to "work out." As they then close-read specific passages together, they began noticing that each character, however minor, had a purpose in the novel in terms of interconnections with the other characters across time and space. They focused on the character of Miranda, who dies when the pandemic hits but continues to circulate throughout the novel by means of her art: a graphic novel entitled *Dr. Eleven*. We see her in the moments before her death, staring out at the ocean:

> She was thinking about the way she'd always taken for granted that the world had certain people in it, either central to her days or unseen and infrequently thought of. How without any one of these people the world is a subtly but unmistakably altered place, the dial turned just one or two degrees. (p. 225)

Miranda became central to the students' own understanding of the most significant themes in the novel: our shared human condition, our intersubjectivity, the role of art, and the ways in which these are mutually constituted in our project to make meaning and to realize (or make real) our own experience of selfhood.

And during these small group conversations I was struck by memories of something that had been a profound learning experience for me in a different integrative interdisciplinary context as I was working toward my clinical degree twenty years ago. For a number of years, I joined my mentor, psychologist Steen Halling, in collaborative research projects on experiences of despair (Beck, et al., 2003) and of deep connection with another (Guts, et al., 2016). In doing this research, we employed a qualitative research methodology called the "dialogal phenomenological method" that Halling and his colleague Jan Rowe (2006) developed in their research on the experience of forgiving another. In this approach, we began by writing and sharing with each other as researchers our individual reflections on our own experience of the phenomenon we were studying. In these conversations, we developed the open-ended interview question(s) that we then used with our research participants. Halling (2014) has eloquently described this approach in a reflection poetically entitled "The Phenomenon as Muse: On Being Open to 'Friendly Invasion'":

> This approach requires a focused and ongoing dialogue among the researchers and between the researchers and the phenomenon under study. There is a disciplined and collaborative focus on the various descriptions, from both the researchers and the research participants such that the phenomenon, as it were, comes to be a presence in the room and a partner in the dialogue. (p. 4)

The "discipline" in this context refers to the attentiveness on the part of the researchers to the phenomenon itself rather than to some disciplinary lens through which to understand the phenomenon.

As my students in that third class gathered together in these small groups to close-read and explore *Station Eleven*, a novel all about human community, I saw the phenomenon manifest in these small groups, even over the computer screen. For that matter, earlier in the term, as we had close-read *Invisible Sign of My Own*, a novel all about isolation, rigidity, and insularity, the phenomenon had emerged in that (Zoom) room as well. This experience underscores what I see as a profound opportunity those of us who teach in the interdisciplinary humanities have to invite students into lived experiences of self-hood and authentic ethical encounters with the Other. Initially, *Station Eleven* threatened to isolate us even further from each other as *Invisible Sign of My Own* had done; but as I invited students to name the fear that this novel was invoking in them, we found our way into a different kind of connection with each other.

Our final novel in the course, *Exit West* by British-Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid (2017), threw us into still another different encounter with existential homelessness. Hamid's novel drops us into a hyper-real present of militant extremism, civil war, global migration, and violent nativist responses to migrants. Hamid's omniscient narrator delivers a story that reads like an amalgamation of a sociological report and a fairy-tale; this is a story, the narrative style suggests, that is generalizable to all humanity. For example, he sets the opening in an unnamed city in the Middle East on the eve of Civil War:

> In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young women in a classroom and did not speak to her . . . It might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class . . . but that is the way of things, with cities as with life, for one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying, and our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does. (p. 4)

The "we," as well as the overarching device of random doors that appear and become portals to other countries around the world through which myriad groups of migrants pass, paints a picture of the whole human species in motion. Indeed, the novel makes it clear that eventually we will all be migrants, if we are not already, whether we move from country to country or stay in place in a shifting cultural landscape. And, of course, our existential condition—our "eternally impending ending" that Gadamer foregrounds—does not preclude, and, in fact, inspires our "transient beginnings and middles," during which time we feel desire, fall in love, fall out of love, go to school, etc. "That is the way of things."

Indeed, this novel's opening illustrates Todres' and Galvin's (2018) theory of existential well-being, even (maybe especially) on the eve of war. The narrative form disrupts our expectations regarding the trajectories of both love and rupture. The two main characters, Nadia and Saeed, are on the verge of

displacement—again, existential homelessness—at the opening of the novel. We see the end of their "everyday" as it is defined by Heidegger, as "numbing comfort" (as cited in Todres and Galvin, 2018, p. 86). But this experience of crisis, while suffused with fear and grief as they lose family members and leave their homeland, also opens up a path of authentic movement for them. They meet in class, fall in love, and travel together through portals, relocating themselves to different parts of the world, while simultaneously attending to their changing relationship as they grow as individuals. While the narrative opens as a "boy meets girl" story, it does not follow a traditionally prescribed path into marriage. They part ways (another rupture) at the same time that they discover new horizons for themselves.

At the end of the novel, the narrative time travels forward to "Half a century later" (p. 229) when, coincidentally, Nadia and Saeed find themselves back in the city of their birth and their meeting. The city is a calmer place now, "the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people, and the city [they] found [themselves] in was not a heaven but it was not a hell, and it was familiar but also unfamiliar" (p. 229). Nadia and Saeed reunite over coffee and talk about the journeys they have taken since their time together (the portals have remained open), and in this conversation we see another homecoming of sorts as Nadia invokes an aspiration that she remembers Saeed sharing with her:

> Nadia asked if Saeed had been to the deserts of Chile and seen the stars and was it all he had imagined it would be. He nodded and said if she had an evening free he would take her, it was a sight worth seeing in this life, and she shut her eyes and said she should like that very much and they rose and embraced and parted and did not know, then, if that evening would ever come. (pp. 230-231)

While some of my students in the final class lamented this ending (longing for a more romantic reunion), many of them recognized it as an example of dwelling-mobility in the sense that these characters are "grounded in the present moment, supported by a past that is arriving and the openness of a future that is calling" (Todres & Galvin, 2018, p. 87). Nothing is prescribed, but all is included in this moment, that, in turn, allows for myriad possibilities.

And the world that Nadia and Saeed have navigated holds this same possibility. Just as the ending resists the romantic outcome we hope for and expect, the descriptions of clashes between migrants and "nativists" through-out the novel resist the catastrophic outcomes that twenty-first-century-readers have also come to expect, given that we are inundated daily with examples of violence and injustice catalyzed by seemingly unbridgeable polar-izing ideologies and political stances. In a poignant scene set in London in the middle of the novel, when heavily armed white "nativists" are poised to murder a crowd of migrants, suddenly there is a pause:

> Perhaps [the nativists] had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist and the extinguishing party would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done . . . . Decency on this occasion had won out. (p. 166)

In a similar vein, towards the end of the novel, a portal that opens into Marin County brings a rich diversity of migrants who outnumber those who have claimed the region as their own birthright; at this point in the novel, "nativeness [has become] a relative matter"(p. 196) So too has "apocalypse"—calling both concepts into question.

> The apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief....Indeed there was a great creative flowering in the region especially in music. (p. 218)

We witness this creative flowering not just in music, but also in food, new forms of community and communion, and new forms of political representation.

This penultimate scene offers us a new view of the West that resists the ideologically dominant narrative of the providential City on the Hill/promised land; instead, we are situated in the possibility of a future world that enlists our imagination in new ways. Like the other two novels, *Exit West* ends poised on the edge of an unknown horizon, not just for our former lovers, but for humanity in general. And in the form of his telling, which reads a bit like a parable, Hamid is offering a kind of meta-narrative: a new possibility for narratives of the human condition that keep contingency and temporariness front and center and, in turn, our profound human capacity for dwelling-mobility, for existential well-being, in the face of catastrophe.

Meanwhile, back in the Zoom-room, as we prepared for the end of spring term 2021, and the end of a long academic year of learning in quarantine, I worked with a graduating senior student to re-imagine the culminating project for the other students in the course (which had originally been a reflective analysis essay). This student, who had taken the course with me during the fall term, had been co-facilitating this term's class for independent study credit. My student was invaluable in helping me attend to the significant differences we sensed in the collective mood in the room between that of the previous fall and six months later. We anticipated the ways in which the students might have been inspired by the imaginative possibilities that *Exit West* posed, but knew that they felt the exhaustion that we were also feeling. Because the

phenomena of insularity/anxiety and creativity/community had appeared in the contexts of discussing the previous two novels, we decided to make room for the phenomenon of dwelling-mobility in response to this final novel. Thus, we issued the assignment as an invitation to explore where they found themselves "in the present moment, supported by a past that is arriving and the openness of a future that is calling":

> Because we find ourselves in this both/and complex landscape (of well-being and catastrophe), this final creative practice invites you to step outside the box of the generic conventions and expectations that a "final assignment" might suggest (hence, we call this a "practice"). That is, we would like you to witness your own navigation of well-being (or lack thereof) within this catastrophic moment, choosing a medium (visual, performative, literary, sculptural, etc.) that you feel would best enable you to witness, represent, and create. We have lived with lots of restrictions/prohibitions over the past year—so this practice is meant to enable your freedom to access your own sensory, emotional, cognitive, and/or creative experiences as you witness your own relationship to well-being. In other words, make something that reflects your journey through this quarter/this class at this moment in your life. There is no GOOD/BAD or RIGHT/WRONG way to engage this assignment. Recognize where YOU are at this moment. And what is meaningful to you. Maybe this can't be expressed in English; maybe this can't be expressed by written words. Don't even aim for a "finished product." Etc. Etc. Etc.

To underscore the "unprecedented" nature of the assignment, I resisted any tools of "calibration" by including, in the place of a rubric, avant-garde composer John Cage's "10 Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life" that he borrowed and popularized from artist and educator Sister Corita Kent. The most significant rules for my students were:

> RULE FOUR: Consider everything an experiment.
>
> RULE SIX: Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make.
>
> RULE TEN: We're breaking all the rules. Even our own rules. And how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for X quantities.
>
> HINTS: Always be around. Come or go to everything. Always go to classes. Read anything you can get your hands on. Look at movies carefully, often. Save everything. It might come in handy later.

After the anxiety and rigidity that I witnessed in my students throughout the first half of this final quarter, I was surprised and gratified that there seemed to be very little consternation in response to the open-endedness of this assignment. I would like to think that our final literary text prepared the students for this practice. Or maybe they were just ready to break the rules. In any case, I was certainly not prepared for the range of responses that included:

- a music video of a student walking to and through an on-campus labyrinth, set to the song "Call it Magic," by Coldplay;
- a sculpture of a lemon tree made out of paper mâché pamphlets from local transit (and other public spaces) about COVID-19 pandemic protocols that was evocative of this student's family home, extended family, and their relationship with death;
- a photo of a freshly-baked loaf of bread and homemade marmalade including a written reflection from the student about sharing this with her housemates-in-quarantine. This student had been feeling increasingly "untethered" from her family. The pandemic was the context, but not the catalyst, for this untethering that, in myriad ways, many college students experience. In all cases, it is disorienting—and this student found moments of authentic homecoming in relationship with her housemates;
- a written-reflection by a student from Iran who, in the end of the quarter, was personally impacted by Israel's airstrikes against Hamas; his good friend and housemate was Palestinian and taught him about the ways in which his family and friends had been caught in the crossfire for generations. This experience led to a series of conversations in which my student invited specific friends and family members into reflections on the power of vulnerability in their own lives;
- myriad paintings, drawings, videos, and photo essays from other students, plus a studio recording of an original song a student had written during the quarter.

COVID-19 as Muse, Not Alibi

If we call the COVID-19 pandemic "unprecedented," my English professor colleague and husband said when he read a draft of this article, we turn it into an "alibi." The pandemic becomes a defense for why we could not show up, an explanation for where we were at the time (i.e. anywhere but here). And I am reminded, again, of the opening of *Exit West:* "our eternally impending ending does not put a stop to our transient beginnings and middles until the instant when it does" (p. 4). At least, it should not do so. And so I chose to mark the end of the third iteration of the class by prompting the students to represent their "transient beginnings and middles." What emerged out of the Final Imaginative Practice assignment was not the usual analytical essay. What emerged were different representations of and reflections on the selves of my students than I would typically encounter in a final project. Like Nadia and Saeed, my students thereby showed up during a pandemic; and I was there to meet them. In that space, in that time, we experienced everydayness in catastrophe together, which is to say that we opened ourselves up to the possibility of well-being.

The students in my third class, most of whom had seemed resistant to showing up throughout the course, reminded me at the conclusion of the course that this resistance itself was an indication of richly important "felt experiences." Attending to our "our way of being in the world" phenomenologically in the class and close-reading the ways the characters in the literary texts showed up in their own worlds gave us opportunities to find common ground and well-being with each other. And so through teaching this course (as through teaching my course on trauma) I have come to understand even more deeply what William Newell meant when he described the interdisciplinary humanities as involving a shared integrative process (Repko, Newell, & Szostak, 2012), a process that, for me, is inseparable from entering the shared space of the class (zoom) room.

In closing, I should note that the story of teaching this class did not, in fact, end in June of 2021; I am teaching the course again this fall. Masked, vaccinated, and wary of our physical proximity to one another, my students and I have returned to the physical space of the classroom. On the first day, as they filed in and sat down facing forward, not daring to look at or interact with each other, one of them broke the silence and said, "I feel like we are placed here like traffic cones."

And so, I begin again.

I decided to open the fourth iteration of this class not with Ungar's pandemic poem, but rather with an invitation that also feels like a reflection on integrative interdisciplinary humanities. I issued this invitation by assigning a chapter by Jenny O'Dell from her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. It is entitled "The Case for Nothing." In it she describes several works of public art that evoke a specific quality of lived experience:

> The artist creates a structure—whether that's a map or a cordoned-off area . . . —that holds open a contemplative space against the pressures of habit, familiarity, and distraction that constantly threaten to close it . . . You can see this effect at work in the circular labyrinths that are designed for nothing other than contemplative walking. Labyrinths function similarly to how they appear, enabling a sort of dense infolding of attention; through two-dimensional design alone, they make it possible not to walk straight through a space, nor to stand still, but something very well in between . . . they unfold secret and multifarious perspectives even within a fairly small area. (pp. 6–7)

I suggested to my students that our classroom could be such a structure and that the kinds of activities I would invite them to engage this term "would hold open a contemplative space against the pressures of habit, familiarity, and distraction that constantly threaten to close it."

I also told them that this is what I believe a course designed to fulfill a requirement in Humanities and Global Challenges fundamentally calls for. And that this is what I believe the process of finding our way into real

connection with each other in a shared physical space will require. The interdisciplinary humanities offer an opportunity to break habits of thinking whether these are disciplinary habits or habits of distraction. They invite us to contemplate works of art, literature, or other kinds of performance that exist outside of ourselves and to pay attention to the ways in which these works resonate within us, and how they may resonate differently within others. The "infolding of attention" that O'Dell says the labyrinth enables is different from the insularity that calibration culture reinforces, particularly in a classroom. Instead, it recalls what I find to be a very moving description that Repko and Szostak (2017) give as they orient students toward the interdisciplinary research process; they describe this process as a "decision-making process that is heuristic, iterative, and reflexive" (p.79). All of these characteristics can be represented in the movement one takes through the labyrinth, movement that enables living and learning, through discovering, doubling back, rediscovering, and reflecting on the habits and assumptions that we all bring to a complex subject such as the necessary relationship between catastrophe and well-being.

This fall, as I began again I remembered that if I really want to invite my students into the labyrinth, I have to be willing to journey with them, which means tolerating contingency, transience, and indeterminacy while also opening myself up to vulnerability, authentic connection, and creativity. Imagining well-being in a catastrophic era is a shared process of discovery requiring that we make space for it all.

Biographical Note

Dr. Jennifer Schulz is a Senior Instructor in the Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies program at Seattle University, Seattle, WA. She holds a doctorate in American literature and a masters in clinical psychology. She teaches a wide variety of interdisciplinary courses on literature, trauma, the body, well-being and catastrophe, integrative interdisciplinary research methods, and creative non-fiction writing. She coordinates the Consortium of Interdisciplinary Scholars at Seattle University and she is also the director of the Seattle University-Pacific Northwest Ballet Educational Partnership, which provides a college education to professional dancers. In addition to her teaching, as a licensed mental health counselor in private practice, she works with adults who have experienced complex/developmental trauma. Dr. Schulz has published articles on early twentieth-century American literature, literature and evocation, and incorporating creative writing practices in qualitative research methodology. She has also conducted phenomenological psychological research on experiences such as despair, intimacy, and "at-homeness." She may be reached at schulzj@seattleu.edu.

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Appendix A
Syllabus (abridged)

"*You can work to make a safe environment, but if the teachings at hand are meant to rattle, people are going to feel rattled . . . This isn't a bad thing.* (*Maggie Nelson*, On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint)

Syllabus: UCOR 3400-02, Humanities and Global Challenges

Imagining Well-Being in a Catastrophic Age

Course Texts

- Bender, Aimee. (2000). *An Invisible Sign of My Own*. First Anchor Books
- Hamid, Mahsud. (2015). *Exit West*. Riverhead Books
- St. John Mandel, Emily. (2014). *Station Eleven*. Vintage Books
- A packet of course readings available on CANVAS

Course Description

In 1946, the World Health Organization implemented its Constitution, whose first principle reads, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." The rest of the preamble underscores that the "highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition." Aside from the fact that this fundamental right has been unrealized since its articulation and is arguably unrealistic in an age of deeply entrenched systemic inequalities born out of globalization, environmental degradation, political corruption, etc., the concept of "well-being"—and what constitutes it—is too complex to operationalize by means of a Constitution or the WHO itself.

That is, well-being can be conceived very differently whether framed through objective measurements or subjective experience and evaluation. As anthropologist Nigel Rapport (2018) describes it, "Well-being is existential rather than metrical, and other adjectives that seem to pertain include personal, momentary, sensorial and variable" (p. 23). Indeed, Rapport situates his phenomenological and cross-cultural study of well-being within a question that underscores the potential diversity of what it means to have a *sense* of well-being: "Is there a *human* story of well-being to tell, or a *cultural* or *social* one, a *geographical* or *historical* one?"

How has well-being been represented (in popular and academic discourses) as a thing to be attained in the 21st century? This course will offer a more complex perspective on the lived experience of well-being particularly during a time in which humans face potential catastrophe from myriad sources: viral, environmental, political, social, economic, etc. We will read literary narratives of homelessness (exile, dislocation, refugee-ism, a sense of being estranged or a stranger, etc.) that, simultaneously, locate a sense of connectedness, community, and hope in the midst of such upheaval.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course (i.e. by *passing* this course), you will have:

1. Employed your unique experiential perspectives, through reflective writing, thus gaining a personal investment in your critical questions and challenging/broadening your perspectives on catastrophe as well as well-being and "at-homeness"
2. Demonstrated rigorous critical analysis grounded in close reading of literature, critical race theory, feminist theory, philosophy, and

contextual texts that focus on the global issue/challenge of displace-
ment and exile due to environmental, political, social, economic,
racialized, gendered, and/or psychological disruption and finding
well-being within these contexts

3. Demonstrated an awareness of *integrative interdisciplinarity*: the ability
   to bring two or more disciplines, intellectual approaches, or methods
   to bear on the complex phenomenon well-being alongside of cata-
   strophic disruption

4. Through both open-form and closed-form writing assignments and/
   or projects, you will have:
   - Created thesis driven arguments that provide specific reasons for
     claims and that draw on close analysis of texts and contexts for evi-
     dence in various genres and for various audiences
   - Made use of appropriate media and/or internet technologies as a
     means of engaging with current political, academic, as well as cul-
     tural discourses about catastrophe and well-being

5. Gained a deep understanding of the global challenge of well-being by
   tracking the importance of psychological, political, social and cultural
   discourses on well-being

6. Analyzed the roles that the above discourses play in the lived experi-
   ence of well-being, particularly among individuals and communities
   who have experienced displacement or significant disruption of an
   everyday

7. Connected literary representations of well-being and "catastrophe"
   to the political, economic, social, and cultural contexts of post-in-
   dustrialization, globalization, systemic racism, and environmental
   degradation (including forced migration, displacement, estrangement
   from and within community, etc.)

8. Reflected on the ways in which you recognize and enact your role as
   global citizen (particularly as this applies to the call to witness the
   Other) and the impact this has on the well-being of others local and
   globally

9. Reflected on the role that reading literature plays in living a socially
   just and engaged life.

Summary of Assignments

(30%) Series of Canvas Discussion Posts

These will make up the bulk of our asynchronous learning together.
They will happen frequently and I will give you specific prompts to initiate
the discussion. I will also invite you to respond to one another's posts in

a threaded discussion and/or to initiate new threads of discussion. I will assign at least 8 of these throughout the quarter and will expect that you will respond to at least 6 (for 5 points each). Because we will try to simulate "real time" discussion on the texts through these posts, posts must be made by the class period/week for which they are due or they will not get credit. (Please let me know if you are unable to keep up with posts and we will devise an alternative).

(*15%*) *Close Reading Assignment*

We will scaffold toward this assignment as "close reading" will be our primary methodology throughout the quarter. In short, you will be doing a close textual analysis of a scene/passage(s) from *Invisible Sign of My Own.*

(*20%*) *Contemporary Resonance Analysis*

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has given us an unusual opportunity to close read contemporary "narratives" of global pandemic in real time as we are close reading Emily St. John's 2014 imagining of global pandemic in *Station Eleven*. This assignment will ask you to do just this.

(*5%*) *Small Group Meetings to Discuss Station Eleven*

(*30%*) *Final Project*

This final project will invite you into a process of reflective analysis about your journey through the course this quarter. I will give you a lot of creative freedom as well as some examples of forms that this project might take.

Class Schedule

Please complete the assignments on the day for which they are due. Please give me feedback when you feel lost, anxious, confused, frustrated, etc.—it is important that I know what is working and what isn't. Nothing is set in stone; it is up to all of us to figure out a system that works best for the class. Let me know if there are ways that I can support you.

Week 1 (Sept. 22–Sept. 24): Who are You? Who Might we Be?

Thursday, Sept. 23

- View/Read Canvas Home Page (+ "Start Here")
- Introductions

Week 2 (September 27–October 1): How to Do Nothing

Tuesday, September 28

Before Class
- Read Syllabus and Course Policies (annotate the syllabus with any questions that you have and bring these to class on Tuesday)
- Read from Jenny O'Dell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*
- Reflection

During Class
- Invite students to raise questions about syllabus and offer points of clarification.
- Discuss Odell, "The Case for Nothing"
- 5 Eyes Practices/5 Ear Practices
- Small Groups: Radical Listening

After Class
- Submit 100-200 word Reflection on Canvas on questions, concerns, hopes, fears about this class

Thursday, September 30

Before Class
- My mini-lecture introduction to Positive Psychology
- Seligman, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, M., (2000) "Positive Psychology: An Introduction"
- (Skim this) Russo-Netzer, "Prioritizing Meaning as a Pathway to Meaning in Life and Well-Being"
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009) "Positive Psychology: The Science of Happiness," from *Bright-Sided*

During
- Discuss positive psychology and the critique

After
- Post on the Muddiest/Clearest/Most Intriguing Points Discussion Board (week 2)

Week 3: (October 4–8) Well-Being in the 21st Century:
Positive Psychology, Happiness Studies and a Culture of
Calibrations. This is the start of Part One of the course:
The Problem of Human "Agency" as a Measure of Well-Being:
Positive Psychology, Popular Culture, and Anxiety in the
21st Century

Tuesday, October 5

Before Class
- Read Cairns, K. & Johnston, J. (2015) Choosing health: Embodied neo-liberalism, postfeminism, and the "do-diet." *Theory and Society* 44 (2). 153–175. (Canvas)
- Post "Calibration" Examples on "Culture of Calibration" Padlet (5pts)

During
- Discuss Cairns and Johnston
- Breakout sessions to share and discuss "Calibration" examples

Thursday, October 7

Before Class
- Read Rapport, "A Sense of Well-Being: The Anthropology of a First-Person Phenomenology"
- Post on Week 3 Discussion Board (5 points)

During
- Discuss Rapport
- Introduce *An Invisible Sign of My Own*

After
- Post on the Muddiest/Clearest/Most Intriguing Points Discussion Board (week 3)

Week 4: (October 11–15): A Sense of Well-Being and Lack Thereof

Tuesday, October 12

Before Class
- Read *Invisible Sign of My Own* up to page 45
- Read Close Reading Guidelines
- Read McLaughlin, "Figurative Language" from C*ritical Terms for Literary Study*
- Contribute to interactive small-group close reading (5 pts)

During
- Small groups
- Complete one-page response to collaborative close-reading

Thursday, October 14

Before Class
- Read *Invisible Sign of My Own* (end of Part I)
- Read Gadamer Mini-Lecture

During
- Discuss Gadamer and the enigma of health + play vs. Calibration Culture

Week 5 (Oct. 18–22): The Lonely Catastrophe of Death Anxiety

Tuesday, October 19

Before Class
- Read *Invisible Sign of My Own* (end of Part II)
- Read Short Analysis Assignment and come with questions

During
- Discuss Short Analysis Assignment
- Discuss *ISOMO* (through Part II)

Thursday, October 21

Before Class
- Complete Invisible Sign of My Own
- Select passage (or passages) for Short Analysis Assignment and begin to annotate
- Read Sample Essay (on Canvas)

During
- Questions about Analysis Assignment
- Discuss ending of *ISOMO*
- Discuss passages in small groups

Week 6 (Oct. 25–29): The Enigma of Health and Transcendence
of Existential Anxiety

Tuesday, October 26

> **Before Class**
> - Draft Short Analysis Essay
>
> **During**
> - Peer review Submit Analysis Essay Draft to breakout group for peer review
>
> **After**
> - Peer review and exchange

Thursday, October 28
> - No Class: Open Zoom office hours

Week 7 (November 1–5): Imagining Well-Being in the Collapse:
Survival is Insufficient. This is the start of Part Two of the course: The
Problem of Human Agency in the Anthropocene:
Imagining Well-Being in the Collapse

Tuesday, November 2

> **Before Class**
> - Read Station Eleven, to end of Part II (page 67)
> - Post to Week 6 Discussion Board
>
> **During**
> - Discuss *Station Eleven*
> - Introduce small-group meeting/class facilitations and Contemporary Resonance Analysis

Thursday, November 4

> **Before Class**
> - Read *Station Eleven*, to end of Part III (page 115)
>
> **During (Meeting for Only Group One)**
> - Group One meeting with Jen (5pts)
>
> **After**
> - Group One Posts Meeting Synopsis to *Station Eleven* Group One Discussion Board for rest of class to read
> - Post Contemporary Resonance by Saturday

Week 8 (November 8–12): Well-Being and Community

Tuesday, November 9

Before Class
- Read *Station Eleven*, Parts IV and V (page 196)

During (Meeting for only Group Two)
- Group Two meeting with Jen (5pts)

After
- Group Two Posts Meeting Synopsis to *Station Eleven* Group Two Discussion Board for rest of class to read
- Post Individual Contemporary Resonance by Thursday

Thursday, November 11: Veterans Day—no class

Week 9 (November 15–19): Dwelling Mobility: An Existential Theory of Well-Being

Tuesday, November 16

Before Class
- Read *Station Eleven*, Parts VI and VII (page 280)

During (Meeting for only Group Three)
- Group Three meeting with Jen (5pts)

After
- Group Three Posts Meeting Synopsis to *Station Eleven* Group Three Discussion Board for rest of class to read
- Post Individual Contemporary Resonance by Thursday

During Class (Full class meeting)

Thursday, November 18

Before Class
- Finish *Station Eleven*
- Read Todres and Galvin, "Dwelling Mobility: An Existential Theory of Well-Being"

During
- Discuss *Station Eleven* and Todres and Galvin

After
- Post on Muddiest (or Clearest!) Points (Week 9) Discussion Board

Week 10 (November 22–26): Exiting Western Society. Part Three of the course: Exiting Western Society—Reimagining Well-Being and Human Community in a Post-Capitalist Era

Tuesday, November 23

Before Class
- *Exit*, West, up through Ch. 6 (p. 118)
- Post Responses

During
- Discuss *Exit*, *West*
- Introduce Final Reflective Analysis

Thanksgiving Break
Week 11 (November 29–December 3): On Endings and Re-Imagining Well-Being

Tuesday

Before Class
- Finish *Exit*, *West*
- Post Responses

During Class
- Discussion *Exit*, *West*
- Questions about Final Reflective Analysis

Thursday, December 2

Before Class
- Read Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities"
- Consider the following questions: What are the ethics of studying well-being in a catastrophic era? How does Tuck's essay, in particular, her "epistemology of desire and complex personhood," resonate with our discussions and readings this quarter? How does it resonate with your lived experiences?
- How has this course impacted you?
- Reflect in your notes on which issues/readings in class have been the most influential for you and how these readings/ideas have impacted your own sense of/understanding of well-being and your experience with contemporary catastrophe

During
- Open Discussion

Finals week
- Turn in Final Reflective Analysis

Appendix B
Disciplinary Perspective Toolkit

Disciplinary *Perspective* is a *lens* through which to view reality. Repko et al. (2020), in *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies*, state that disciplinary perspective "is a distinctive form of perspective associated with communities of disciplinary specialties in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, the fine and performing arts, the applied fields, and the professions . . . A discipline's perspective embraces, and in turn reflects, the ensemble of its defining elements that include the phenomena it prefers to study, its epistemology, assumptions, concepts, and favored theories and methods" (pp. 126–131).

A disciplinary perspective is comprised of the following *defining elements of a discipline* which are all mutually reinforcing (see Repko & Szostak, 2017, pp. 147–212.

The *phenomena* it studies are the "subjects, objects, and behaviors that a discipline considers to fall within its research domain" (Repko et al., 2020, p. 134). The "what" of the discipline. For example,

- Cultural Anthropology / Culture / food, music, clothing, rituals
- Business / Economy / ownership, profit, labor, output.

Its *epistemology* is the rules about what constitutes knowledge, evidence or "proof"; how one knows what is true and how one validates truth. "Each discipline has a different conception of what constitutes knowledge, how it is produced and how it should be applied (Repko et al., 2020, p. 136). Examples are *empiricism* (e.g. knowledge derived from observation, is replicable, etc.), *constructivism* (e.g. knowledge is shaped by social and cultural context), *interpretivism* (e.g. knowledge is attained by close reading), etc. *All disciplines have ways of "knowing" that are mutually constituted by assumptions, theories, methods, etc.*

There are three overarching epistemological categories (but these are nuanced in each discipline).

- *Knowledge is Mechanistic* (Natural Sciences)—empirical/rational (universal truths) (observation, experimentation, predictive)
- *Knowledge is Contingent* (Social Sciences)—tends to embrace more than one epistemology/pluralist (interplay among empiricist/positivist and constructivist: knowledge is socially constructed)
- *Knowledge is Narrative* (Humanities)—knowledge is based on interpretation and is constructed socially or individually.

There are two primary epistemological approaches:

- Modernist: belief in objective, empirically based, rationally analyzed truth that is knowable
- Postmodernist: there is no such thing as objective truth

The *assumptions* it makes about the natural and human world are the "things that are accepted as true or certain [by the discipline] . . . . [They] mostly reflect epistemology, but capture elements of ethics, metaphysics, and ideology when these are particularly important" (pp. 140–141). *Assumptions can sometimes be the most difficult to identify and articulate because they are often the most "taken for granted" element within the disciplinary perspective.* For example, Earth Science has a uniformitarianist epistemology based on the assumption that natural laws will remain constant (since history of the earth is not directly observable).

Its basic *concepts* give discipline-specific vocabulary (or "jargon") to phenomena, or changes in phenomena, or relationships among phenomena; they may also "represent elements within a particular theory or method" (p. 144). *For example, a psychologist may look at the phenomena of sadness, disinterest, and trouble waking up in the morning and assign the concept of* depression *to this collection of phenomena. Note, however, that different disciplines may use the same word to describe different concepts. Consider how psychology defines the concept of* depression *versus the way in which economics would define the same word, or the way in which meteorology would define this term.*

Its *theories* explain the causes and behaviors of certain phenomena: "a generalized scholarly explanation about some aspect of the natural or human world, how it works, and why specific phenomena or events are related, that is supported by data and research" (p. 144). Disciplinary theories often drive the questions asked within the discipline, the phenomena investigated, and the insights produced.

Its *methods* refer to the way the discipline gathers, applies, and produces new knowledge—the *how*.

Data are "by definition that which is observed" (p. 150). See also the questions that interdisciplinarians ask about data (p. 152).

Its *insights* reflect the findings that all of the above lead to.

Reading Guide for Positive Psychology Disciplinary Articles

Strong writing is borne out of active reading so I would like us to step through the following process while reading these peer-reviewed articles. Please engage these steps in your notes/journal and by annotating the article itself.

You do not need to turn these in to me but I would like you to use them to inform your specific response to the *Canvas Discussion Post prompt.*

Content Response: Read the article for content. Simply get a sense of the writers' thesis and main points about articulating the newly proposed subfield (in 2000) of "positive psychology." After doing this first reading, *freewrite* your initial reaction/response to the theory and literature review. Put fingers to keyboard and write without stopping for five minutes, considering the following questions: Does the article seem to reflect your own experiences and/or your own perspective on positive subjective experience? Where did you find yourself gratified or irritated, vindicated or offended, intrigued or bored, or . . . ? How do you account for this *affective* (in other words, emotion or mood-driven) experience of reading? Again, let yourself write without editing or questioning this initial response. This is the time simply to value any and all responses and free up your thinking/writing process. Even if you disagree with yourself later, some of the most fruitful critical ideas emerge from these initial raw and experiential responses.

Structure Response: Now go back and re-read the article for the *structure, coherence, and consistency* of the argument. There is a wonderful method to assess coherence, which may feel arduous at first but I guarantee will serve you well in the future as you embark on your final reflective analysis essay for this class.

- Identify the thesis of the article, underline it and label "thesis" next to it in the margin
- Find the topic sentence of each paragraph. Underline it and label it in the margin
- Reread each paragraph with an eye towards coherence and consistency: how does the rest of the paragraph work to support the topic sentence? That is, does the evidence used respond directly to the topic sentence or does it stray from the point? Summarize in the margin of each paragraph what the paragraph "does" to prove what it "says" in the topic sentence
- As you read slowly through the argument, highlight those places that seem most significant or that seem to articulate the most important implications of the argument

Disciplinary Response. Please look at the *Disciplinary Perspective* toolkit that I have compiled. See if you can deepen your annotation of these essays by identifying examples of the disciplinary elements at work: phenomena, assumptions, epistemology, concepts, theories and methods. Don't obsess over this too much as here I am asking you to do something that I teach over the course of a whole quarter (in my Methods of Interdisciplinary Research class). This is just a good practice for closely analyzing a research essay and getting a good sense of how the discipline (in this case positive psychology)

does its work. It will also help us to compare and contrast this disciplinary perspective on well-being with that of philosophers, anthropologists, and of course, literary writers.

Rhetorical Response. Finally, try to identify the rhetorical strategies that the writers use to make their points. Does the article draw and keep your attention? How? (For example, look at the use of rhetorical questions, anecdotes, examples, figures and tables). Is the writers' writing style/grammar distracting or dull? In what way? Once you have systematically stepped through the article, you will have a much clearer and more detailed understanding of essay than, presumably, you had after a first reading.

Thus, after this second reading, look back at your initial freewrite and do a second *freewrite (this will be the bulk of your Discussion Post)* that responds to your first and revises your initial reactions (or reinforces them) based on your more systematic reading of the article. Reference specific aspects about the disciplinary perspective that inform your response to this article (for example, you might reference the writers' assumption that there are "normal people" (p. 5 and p. 8)—which, of course, implies the assumption that there are "abnormal people"). Also, discuss your sense of the essay's significance. To what extent does it shape or counter your understanding of well-being? This response should be at least 250 words and will comprise the beginning of your Discussion Post. Wait to post it until you complete the following.

Next. Read the example I posted of an empirical study from *The Journal of Happiness Studies* (one journal devoted to this subfield of positive psychology) using the Disciplinary Perspective Toolkit. I selected this because I wanted to show you a somewhat recent study that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's call-to-research in 2000 continues to prompt.) Add a few sentences of reflection/response to the above after reading this work.