



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Rob Roeser – Transforming Education

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Opening Quote – Rob Roeser (00:03): *What we tried to do is to create communities of practice—professional learning communities—and to really think about flourishing for self, others and the planet as the center of what a place of learning should be about. If we can create a little bit of finding our place in the universe, finding our unique gifts, caring about each other, engaging in beauty and the creation of artwork... if we can create schools that are around those kinds of ideas of emotional awe and interdependence, whether that's a preschool or primary school, a secondary school or a university, maybe our whole future depends on it.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. It's great to be back in your feeds. And today we're kicking things off with a show about education, in honor of the back-to-school season. My guest is one of the leaders in contemplative education and developmental psychology, Rob Roeser. Rob is at Pennsylvania State University, and has one of the best titles I've ever heard for his job. He is, among other things, the Bennett Pierce Professor of Caring and Compassion. And as you'll hear, he's been thinking deeply and expansively about education for decades.

(01:23) I'll be brief here so we can get right to the episode. Of course, you can always find details and resources in the show notes. I just want to share with you one of the insights I gained from this conversation. We get into a discussion of how a lot of the skills and ethical frames that we gain from meditation—things like compassion and understanding interdependence—are learned implicitly, not as much through language, but through role modeling. And because of this, Rob puts an emphasis not only on teaching students, but working with adults to shift the larger container of culture and norms. This has huge implications for societal change writ large, and hearing Rob's perspective really expanded my understanding of what contemplative education can do.

(02:11) There's so much in our conversation today, a lot of my favorite topics. We touch on attachment theory, self, othering and bias, neuroplasticity, systems thinking, social activism, and more. I loved chatting with Rob about all of this, and as I said, it's left me thinking in new ways about the role of education in our society. I hope this gives you a little bit of a new framework as well. It's such a pleasure to start off our new season by sharing with you, Rob Roeser.

Wendy Hasenkamp (02:46): I'm so happy to be joined today by Rob Roeser. Welcome, Rob, to the show. Thanks for being here.

Rob Roeser (02:52): Hi, Wendy. It's so good to be with you again and to be on the podcast with you today.

Wendy Hasenkamp (02:58): I always love to start with some background from the guests, so I would love to hear a little bit of your story and path, and how you got into studying education, psychology, bringing in contemplative practices, all those things.

Rob Roeser (03:13): Thank you so much. It's been a journey of detours, dead ends, and wrong turnings, but maybe that's the way it always is. I think it started, my interest in education and human development began at the University of Michigan, where we were really thinking about how to transform whole school cultures to make schools places where curiosity and a love of learning was really at the center. And that began a long journey of thinking about schools as an institution in the culture that's responsible really for more than just academic skill development, although we see that as primary. It's obviously associated with citizenship, socialization. And I think in our time, which is the exciting thing, we've really tried to recenter holistic development, thinking about the social and emotional and ethical lines of development that schools can also cultivate.

(04:15) I'll just say a couple of things, because I then quit grad school, which made all the difference. *[laughter]* The one thing I learned before I left Michigan was that we needed to think about reinventing not just the practice and the institution of school, but actually our vision of it. And as one example, I became very interested in the metaphors we used to define schools. Those had traditionally been agrarian, and of course in the 19th and 20th century, they became more factory metaphors as societies became industrialized. And that was especially true in Europe and the United States when then that got exported.

(04:55) And so this idea of a machine, a factory, a bureaucracy, rather than something like kindergarten, which was conceived of as children as plants and educators as tenders of plants as it were... It started to strike me that at the deepest levels in our society around education and other things, even the metaphors and the stories we were using to frame those endeavors were outdated and problematic from the perspective of all that was going on in the world. We had climate change, we had all sorts of war and strife, and we had these metaphors about what we were doing, aims and purposes in education that also seemed a bit dated. And so it kind of led to a long-term quest about what kind of education is needed now.

(05:51) I'll just say one more thing about that. I then quit the University of Michigan graduate school (which I am not necessarily recommending, *[laughter]* but I'm not against taking a little time away from grad school), and I studied with a Catholic theologian at the time, named Matthew Fox, who had created an institute in California at Holy Names College that was mixing different ways of knowing—different traditions, different kinds of people—to try to create a new vision of meaning and purpose in this universe. But really in a more local sense, a new form of education where poets, artists, philosophers, scientists, contemplatives and social activists came together to really talk about cultural renewal.

(06:43) And that sort of made all the difference, not just thinking and reading about a new way of envisioning education, but to really be participating in it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (06:55): That's fascinating. What kinds of things, practically, were happening in that form of education that were inspiring to you?

Rob Roeser (07:04): I think first of all, it was a kind of education that was placing our journey as a human community, and as an individual human, at the center. So really, what education was about was in that traditional Indigenous American idea of knowing your place, a sense of belonging, thinking about one's unique gifts to offer, and really thinking about education as an education for life—not education for participation in an increasingly global economy. That's not unimportant, but it was centering the person. And then this different value on ways of knowing—the aesthetic, the scientific/rational, the mythopoetic, the ecological—was so welcoming of different people and different traditions and different ways of knowing.

(08:04) And then what I really loved about Matt, and maybe this will come up later in our discussion of contemplative education now, is there was a real accent on the body and our earthiness, our connection to the earth and the plants and the animals. There was a focus on being in nature, and there was a real focus on two things—art as meditation, and social service as meditation. And so Matt Fox was not against what he called "introverted" forms of meditation, but he was very keen on art as meditation, and social transformation as primary practices, as it were.

Wendy Hasenkamp (08:51): I love that. So you were just also mentioning then the contemplative forms and bringing in meditation and mindfulness, which you've done so much work around. So was that the beginning of that for you? And how did that evolve into mindfulness as we see it today?

Rob Roeser (09:07): Yes, thank you, and I'll give you the condensed version, but I think the seeds were planted in Oakland, and then I went back to Michigan and I got my PhD. I became an assistant professor at Stanford. And I would say slowly, slowly, slowly, mainly through teaching, I was trying to integrate some of the things that I had learned. But it seemed a high-risk strategy in the late 1990s and early 2000s to be thinking about doing research on meditation or becoming a, as maybe Richie Davidson might've called it once upon a time, an "out of the closet meditator" in the academy. It was a little bit early for that. And to be honest, Wendy, I always thought about it and I thought (I was at Stanford), after I get tenure.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:53): Yeah, then you're safe.

Rob Roeser (09:54): Yeah, I'm safe. And then I didn't get tenure. *[laughter]* But the bumper prize was a Fulbright to India to study schools that were using meditation with adolescents, and that was 2005. And then later that year I saw the Mind & Life meeting in Washington DC with Richie [Davidson] and Jon [Kabat-Zinn] on contemplative practice and well-being. And a whole new set of ideas and worlds were opening up around how one might think about and study this. So I would see that 2005 year, and really meeting Mind & Life people for the first time, as a major catalyst for this phase of beginning to explore applications of contemplative practice in mainstream education.

Wendy Hasenkamp (10:43): I wanted to ask you about your time in India around that time, and you were studying, you said the use of meditation in school settings there. Was that more common there and done well before here just because culturally it was more normative? And what were some of the lessons that you learned from those experiences?

Rob Roeser (11:04): The schools that I picked were mostly Sanskrit and Hindu in origin. And that was my own path at that point, my own practice path, so I became quite interested in are people in India doing this with young people, and what do the young people think about it? It would be hard for me to say if it were ahead or different because those practices in those private schools were still ensconced in a classical religious tradition, much you might find in a traditional religious private school here.

(11:37) But I think more than that, what I would learn over the next decade thinking about that Fulbright was, these schools were trying to—like many schools in developing nations all over the world—the schools that I was studying were in part trying to blend together a kind of education that was both grounded in culture and tradition of, in this case, primarily Hindu, India (although there were different kinds, Christian schools and others), and provide a kind of world-class education in English that could allow the sons and daughters to be positioned to participate in India's part in the global economy. And so this tension between post-modernity and the global economic world and the desire to hold onto traditional values and practices, especially in a place like India or Bhutan or Thailand or many different places around religion, I think gave rise to some of these schools that I was seeing.

(12:43) And on the other hand, people like Krishnamurti had really thought the followers (I had studied some Krishnamurti schools), that maybe we could inculcate this kind of worldview and training earlier. So it was a bit of a blend. Some of it was because of India having these long traditions, and some of it was kind of a response to local historical change that had been going on in the second half of the 20th century.

Wendy Hasenkamp (13:09): You mentioned when you got back from India, you started connecting with Mind & Life, and at that time it just so happened there were big meetings happening about contemplative work, but also bringing this scientific lens. So do you want to talk a little bit about how you began to think about bringing the science in, as a way of integrating into educational contexts these more ethical frames?

Rob Roeser (13:38): Sure. So upon arriving back from India, I saw that there was a lot of hope for these practices; and there was some question as to what the skillful means was for engaging young people in them in a way that really felt vitalizing and motivating for them. And I think this is still a challenge in all of the work, especially with adolescents today.

(14:04) Anyway, I came back and by a stroke of fortune, I became the senior program coordinator for Mind & Life, and worked with Richie Davidson and Mark Greenberg on what we called MLERN for the next five years, which was the Mind & Life Education Research Network (MLERN).

(14:21) And really that was a process of trying to explore whether it might be possible to develop a scientific approach to studying these efforts in education with children and adolescents and early adults, and if there was also a way, or were people already creating developmentally appropriate practices. And so we thought... I remember Jon Kabat-Zinn saying, "Remember the thousand-year view here." And so we thought we'd just get smart for three or four years on what was going on. And then it was like a tsunami of practice innovation happened in the world, and it was kind of clear that we should probably do some science to catch up and see what the impact of all this was, because it was not a thousand years away. It was really happening in real time.

(15:16) The big idea, I'll just say that Richie and others had been developing, was that these practices were skills that could be taught and learned... of course, you had to think about motivating that learning. And that was right in the wheelhouse of education. I mean, it was an educational view of meditation. And so it had a real resonance and fit with, "Okay, let's think about this as an intervention, or even a prevention strategy, in the first two decades of life."

Wendy Hasenkamp (15:48): Maybe it's worth saying concretely... I'm just curious, either at that time or now, how you think about the skills that you're trying to help train. What was the scope of that? What were you trying to instill in children at that young age?

Rob Roeser (16:04): That's a great question. And part of the MLERN was to blend basic understanding of human development with this new innovative idea about cultivation through contemplative practice. And so of course, we were looking at things like, at 3 to 5 years old, early childhood, we know that the prefrontal cortex and the child's ability to regulate their body and their speech was really developing at that age. Could meditation impact those kinds of skills, self-regulatory skills? And there was a sense already that they could through SEL approaches. Could we train attention directly? What about theory of mind, our ability to understand other people and their minds and hearts? That's coming online. Could we cultivate empathy and kindness and compassion? So more emotional skills alongside focused attention and regulating our bodies and our speech a bit.

(17:04) So it was really these two baskets—attention skills, and social and emotional skills. And then later when we started to think about adolescence, that grew to thinking about perspective taking and systems thinking, and seeing the bigger picture and seeing from different angles. So these skills were sort of mapped along a trajectory in childhood and adolescence as key to human health, well-being and learning. And then we tried to marry the science of meditation onto that.

(17:37) And I would say we started... I would say it's almost like a Zeigarnik effect where something has started, but it hasn't come to closure. My own view is, the secret sauce of Mind & Life in producing specific fields of science has been this deep and meaningful interaction of contemplatives, practitioners, scientists. And I think MLERN, we started that process and maybe a little later again, but I still think there's something there to be brought to full fruition—a developmental contemplative science that could inform, in the way that you're asking the question, what kinds of practices would we expect to impact what kinds of skills, for what kinds of outcomes at what ages?

Wendy Hasenkamp (18:24): It's making me remember, around that time you're speaking of, and this was the first time I was also hearing about people suggesting bringing meditation into schools even at young ages. And there was a lot of debate, even among Buddhist scholars around, is that appropriate? Can children of these ages do these kinds of practices, or should they? So I'm just curious from your experience how you all wrestled with those questions.

Rob Roeser (18:52): Yes. I think it's so important, and my own view (and it would be good to hear others' views) from the MLERN experience was, that this kind of idea of a wide scale approach to teaching some forms of meditation in schools was rather novel, even within the traditions which had long monastic traditions. And so it wasn't clear in MLERN. And I would say a couple of things happened. The first one was we decided in that event that the dictum "do no harm" should be the first principle.

(19:27) And a second idea that I really think is critically important for this whole contemplative education movement was the need to be thinking intergenerationally right from the beginning. Such that we're working with the adults on their skill development and embodiment and understanding of these things as a precursor to imparting them to students—something that really hadn't happened in SEL until 30 years after the student program development phase.

Wendy Hasenkamp (19:59): So you mentioned SEL, that's social emotional learning. And maybe you could just say a brief bit for the audience about what was happening there.

Rob Roeser (20:07): Yes. We're sister allies. Social emotional learning is about a 35-year-old approach to trying to teach young people skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and kindness. So it's similar to contemplative education. Maybe contemplative education approaches enrich social emotional learning by a direct focus on attention training, and a focus also on qualities like compassion, which is not as salient in social emotional learning. But the other big thing that social emotional learning and contemplative education have kind of come into awareness of together is, that we really want to be working with the adults and the young people together.

(20:54) And the one thing I want to say based on the evidence on that is, you could imagine just imparting practices to adults, parents, teachers, community leaders. And maybe they don't actually have to go to the young people, because of this idea that the adults are in some asymmetrically important way, creating the "weather" and the opportunities for child development. So there was a "do no harm" dictum because this had never really been done at scale, and there was this idea to really focus on the adults in addition to the children and the youth.

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:31): I love that, yeah. Because I was thinking about this whole space of educating young people in these ethical frames and these kinds of emotional skills and social skills. And yeah, it feels so much like those things are part of a culture and norms that are created in a community that are learned implicitly. These feel like the kinds of things that you just pick up if you're surrounded by people who are modeling these things for you. So I love that you were just speaking about that it was really intentional from the start of this contemplative education movement to focus on the adults. I assume that's both adults in the children's lives and the teachers in the school setting too.

Rob Roeser (22:12): Exactly. And in India, many places, there's a phrase that "moral values are more caught than taught." That there's this role modeling implicit imitation that's going on. And I think the other thing that contemplative approaches add is that some of these skills are better practiced than talked about. That these are forms of learning that are often what we might call tacit or experiential or before language—whether that's the embodiment by the teacher, or the rote training of attention on a single object. These are... they're not verbal learning.

(22:56) And I think this is another powerful idea that has vexed moral and values education forever, is that we just talk, talk, talk. But it doesn't matter how much you talk about well-being, it doesn't necessarily make you feel better. You have to do some other things. You have to build some skills and relationships and so on.

(23:16) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (23:16): I'm thinking about, you mentioned particularly the emphasis on compassion that has been newer in the contemplative education space. And it feels like instilling compassion, or those ethics kind of, at a young age relates very much to what we know scientifically about our innate capacity for compassion—and also our innate kind of preferences for people who are like us. And so I've heard you speak really beautifully about some of that fundamental research. I wonder if you could share a little bit of overview on that for the audience here.

Rob Roeser (24:22): Yes. Before I get to the social interpersonal part, I just want to say this is a great example of where a developmental view can be instructive. If we think about it developmentally, issues of care, safety, comfort, alleviation of suffering, are all there way before attention. In fact, we would say all of those social processes are driving attention, in a kind of bottom up way. And so people may notice sometimes the compassion or loving kindness practices, they seem very close to us. And there's

evidence, of course that you know about, that even cultivating some of these qualities, it may happen a bit more quickly than the development of nonjudgmental mindful awareness, for instance.

[\(25:15\)](#) And that's true developmentally. We often talk about care before concepts. We might even talk about secure attachments before attention regulation in the infants. Their temperament and their relationships with others are driving their attention.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(25:31\)](#): So I hadn't really thought about that before, but that really makes sense. That those basic needs for security and safety and care, which as you said, are inherently social for humans—we can't do that for ourselves—are first, and then we learn attentional skills to actually serve that, right? Is that what you're saying? That we develop attention to be able to understand where in our environment we need to focus in order to ensure that safety, or get that care? Is that where you were going with that?

Rob Roeser [\(26:03\)](#): Yes. In the best case scenario, if I feel safe and trusting with a more expert other (let's say it's my caregiver), if I'm in that open space, I then have access to curiosity and the ability to engage in joint attention with the adult. So if I have care and comfort, then I can start to train my attention in the average expectable, good enough environment of child development.

[\(26:32\)](#) And so in a way, developmentally, when things go right, care comes before attention. And yet in schools, somehow we started in the opposite way. We started with mindfulness, and then we thought kindness is important. *[laughter]* But maybe there's something there.

[\(26:52\)](#) Because the idea here is that attention training, whatever it is, like any other kind of training, is also relational. That is, you point out my breath to me and you tell me to focus on it, and you might suggest to me that my mind might wander and then I can bring it back. You're pointing out, you're giving me regulatory... you are teaching me through social speech how to regulate my own attention. Later that might come inside as me regulating my attention. So on this view, it's all social. And it's all predicated on a safe base and a development of the limbic system in the brain that isn't hypersensitive and threatened all the time, but is curious, safe, open, can learn.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(27:40\)](#): Right, right. And I've had a few conversations with other guests on the podcast about attachment theory and these ideas of a secure base and having that as a foundation. And if you don't, you can develop, as you said, a hypervigilance because it's not clear to you as an infant or a child that security will be there, or that safety will be there. So you learn to be very attentive in your environment, and that can lead to other issues down the road. But yeah, I love the way you just said that about, when the safety is there, then there's this openness and curiosity that is available.

Rob Roeser [\(28:18\)](#): And that's the best condition under which to develop healthy attention rather than hypervigilant attention, which is associated with all sorts of trauma, and the lack of support or safety and care. And so of course in schools, we have so many kids who have experienced various kinds of trauma. I guess the invitation here is a developmental contemplative science would always say we would start with the relationships, with the sense of safety and care, with curiosity, and then move on to other things.

[\(28:52\)](#) And I'm not saying this doesn't happen. I think a lot of programs start with the body and start with grounding and are trauma-informed now. It took us some time, but I think this idea of starting with relationships, starting with the heart, and then maybe moving towards the attention, is one of the insights that could come from a developmental approach.

Wendy Hasenkamp (29:16): Beautiful. So we were speaking about the emphasis on compassion and the development of that in particular, what's required for that.

Rob Roeser (29:25): That's right. And as you know, another big idea here is that the earlier that we can cultivate certain things in development, there's more ability to change and grow and develop earlier in time than later in time—never goes to zero, but... *[laughter]*

Wendy Hasenkamp (29:40): More neuroplasticity earlier.

Rob Roeser (29:42): Yes, neuroplasticity. Windows of opportunity for cultivating these abilities that might then confer a lifelong benefit, where we didn't later have to unlearn our stereotyping or our discriminatory views or our biases. Could there be a way to cultivate some awareness of how we see each other? How we tend to extend care and kindness to those who we see as self-similar? And to really start to explore, what does it mean to be self-similar? Is it really just the perceptual features that I determine, or is there a way to teach kids about how no one wants to be treated unfairly, or have their stuff taken. And you don't feel that way, and so in some ways, we're all self-similar in that way, and so we should protect each other's rights in that way. So could we start to curtail some of the problems of othering and stigmatization that... you know, actually peak in middle childhood.

Wendy Hasenkamp (30:45): Hmm, interesting.

Rob Roeser (30:46): Yes. This is really interesting. And they start so early, Wendy. I think there's some new science on perceptual narrowing in homogeneous environments around the perception of people who are similar or different. And so teaching a little more empathy, teaching people to tell their stories, teaching perspective taking, working cooperatively on valued projects together. Are there ways that we could incorporate contemplative practice, but also good basic pedagogical practice, to try to foster interpersonal relations that are more harmonious and less marginalizing earlier in development, for more and more people? I think this is one of the implications of moving towards this care, kindness, this openness and curiosity about others, this tendency to want to be helpful in young children.

Wendy Hasenkamp (31:42): You were just saying "tendency to want to be helpful." It's making me think of that research with the stuffed animals. Can you quickly describe that for the audience? I think it's really instructive.

Rob Roeser (31:52): Well, there was a puppet show. And basically an infant in the first year of life or up to 12 months of age... yeah first year, 14 months, is watching the puppet show. And they have to basically choose, do they like a puppet who helps another puppet with a task or gets in the way and hinders them? And there's evidence—this is Karen Wynn's study out of Yale—that in the first year of life, there's a real pro-social tendency to want to reward helpers. But that somewhere in the second year of life, let's say around 18 months of age, that preference seems to become bifurcated. And children start to want people who they perceive as like them to be helped, but people who they perceive as to be different than them to be punished.

(32:44) So something happens in the second year of life that turns what seems to be a kind of altruistic tendency for cooperation, which makes perfect sense in a helpless infant that's a social mammal, dependent on others utterly for its survival. Those are the tendencies you need. But somehow in the second year of life, those get narrowed a bit. And some of the evidence now suggests also in the first year of life maybe, even perceptually.

Wendy Hasenkamp (33:13): I'm wondering just evolutionarily why that would be. You know, a lot of the problems that we try to work with in these contemplative approaches now is because our brains are living in environments that weren't really designed for. But thinking long ago when we were evolving, I wonder if it was a good strategy, in that people who perceptually looked like you, it was more likely that they would be a safe interaction or something. I don't know. Have you thought about that from an evolutionary standpoint? And then what might be wrong with that today?

Rob Roeser (33:51): Yeah totally. I think this is a big debate in the moral development field. Is selective altruism the adaptive approach from the beginning because of different groups, or was that culturally constructed in some way? And I think we don't know, but I do remember presenting this to the Dalai Lama, and his question quite quickly back to me is, when does self in essence take residence in the mind? And of course, around 18 months, we develop an internalized, what we might call a reified self. Robert. And now I can be assigned blame, "Robert did it." And credit, "Oh, Robert did it."

Wendy Hasenkamp (34:29): Separate from others.

Rob Roeser (34:31): Exactly. So now there's an individuated self, there's a symbol for that. There's a narrative starting around that, and one has to believe that that creates a basis for self-similarity that must've had some function, but probably gets over generalized to groups and even larger collectives.

Wendy Hasenkamp (34:52): And then as you say, the cultural constructions around that, that we as humans have created over many, many millennia.

Rob Roeser (34:59): Absolutely. And what's amazing, Wendy, and I think the point of all this is, most of the socialization of that in-group out-group hierarchical structure of society seems to occur during say, 5 to 10 [years of age]. And it happens a lot through peer-to-peer interaction and role modeling. It's not explicit. It can be, of course, don't get me wrong—there's a lot of racism and sexism and transphobia going on in our society. But it is something that's "caught" by the young people in the culture. And so perhaps by bringing attention, bringing love, kindness, awareness, bringing some explicit understanding of what is a very powerful implicit learning process, may be one way to start to try to change that trajectory, especially given in many societies, schools are so segregated that it accentuates that tendency.

Wendy Hasenkamp (35:58): So this is the good news, there's the nature/nurture. And there is some nature elements there setting us up in certain ways, but there's a whole lot of nurture that we can re-pattern in different contexts with different experiences. So I don't know, do you want to share some of the specific ways that you use in your classes or in the programs that help young people expand, for example, the sense of self?

Rob Roeser (36:28): Yes. So I'll give you an example—can I switch to college students since I'm not working with preschoolers? *[laughter]* So we teach a series of classes, one that was developed with the University of Virginia and University of Wisconsin and Penn State called Art and Science of Flourishing. And one of the ideas that we're trying to inculcate in that course is common humanity. That we're not trying to deny differences or spiritually bypass that, because that's not true either. There are real and beautiful cultural, linguistic, racial, religious differences. And there's this other level of fundamental similarity.

(37:12) We do two exercises that I really love, three maybe. The first is, especially in individualistic cultures where the self is so prominent, I think there's feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy that are really plaguing much of the population, but especially young people today. We see this with anxiety and depression really being through the roof in college students.

(37:36) So one of the things we do is we ask them to think about a hidden vulnerability that they experience. On a scale of 1–10, it's a 5. It's not a 10 in terms of how important. And so they write it down, "I'm afraid if I fail, my parents will really be mad at me," or something. And then they fold it up and they put it in a hat. And then we pass the hat around and each person takes one out and reads the hidden vulnerability as if it's their own. But the only rule is it can't be your own. And so we go around the room and people hear things like, "I tend to be depressed and wonder if I'll make friends here," or whatever it is. And then the instruction is, what do you feel in your body? So what was that embodied experience like? And then maybe what did you notice?

(38:25) And so, one of the ideas that this can disclose is, "I didn't know you worry about your parents," or "I didn't know that someone else thought they weren't ever going to make friends." So we start to realize, "Oh God." This is what minds do. They're always worrying and trying to keep us on track even though they're not always helping.

(38:42) And then we do the same thing with hidden talents, and we do that again and, "Oh we have a singer, we have a poet." We have all these things in this room that no one had any idea were in the room. And so I think the first idea is that we mistake our perceptions of other people, even ourselves, for the total reality of that one. And that this reification and limitation is limiting, this kind of a reified view of others. And maybe there's so much more—some of it really in common, some of it amazing and unique to this being. Who knows?

Wendy Hasenkamp (39:24): That's beautiful. I love that. And it must create such a sense of community, just that exercise within the class. Have you experienced that?

Rob Roeser (39:32): It's so true. And I once had this demographer... Or, uh... He studies maps.

Wendy Hasenkamp (39:38): Cartographer.

Rob Roeser (39:39): Cartographer, thank you. He thought if we map the social distance between people before and after an exercise like that... Or "just like me," where you look at someone and someone narrates how this person has dreams and hopes, just like me. This person has been sad and worried just like me. If you were to map how close people were before and after that, they would get closer afterwards. And I think it's right on, because you realize, "Oh, not so different than... Oh, something in common. Just like me, no one wishes to suffer. Oh, just like me, everyone wishes to be happy."

Wendy Hasenkamp (40:16): I love too that that course is the Art and Science of Flourishing. I feel like so often we emphasize the science, and that's the pathway to truth. But it's making me think of your initial experiences with Matthew Fox and those ideas about bringing in the art. Do you weave those kinds of practices also into this course?

Rob Roeser (40:37): Yes, and it's so critical. And thanks for following the breadcrumbs. *[laughter]* Because what I realized with Matt Fox is... like a poem can give you... Rumi can give you so much in three lines. So we use the contemplative poetry like many. We actually have a whole unit on thinking about the experience and/or making of art as an absolutely essential old way of human flourishing—

singing, dancing, painting, you name it. The old ways. And then we've really moved over time to letting young people... really focusing on expression of learning.

(41:20) I was shocked and horrified yesterday when someone asked ChatGPT to comment on the effects of mindfulness training in class like Roeser would. And it was so good. There's no chance for an essay anymore! *[laughter]* But if we allow them to create something, especially for someone they care about or love, as a manifestation, an expression of their learning that has some practical value of connecting them to someone else, it's just amazing.

(41:50) I really feel like the class, Wendy, it's like a campfire that has not been tended for a bit. And you go up and you just blow on the embers a little... All of a sudden there's great heat and light there. And I think that's the great hope of these practices. It's not going to solve everyone's problem, but there's so much surplus suffering that with a little of this participatory educational medicine could be alleviated. It's very hopeful.

(42:19) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (42:51): I want to chat with you about the science in general about these kinds of interventions. But before we get there, just on your personal experience, I don't know how long you've been teaching this course, but how is it received? Is it a class that lots of people want to take? And maybe some of the things that have happened for students...

Rob Roeser (43:15): Yeah. I can say at Penn State, and I think at the other campuses too, it's really grown, and the demand for it from the highest levels of the university... the word "flourishing" now appears in discussions of the president of the university here. And I know that's also true in Virginia and probably in Wisconsin. And so I think there's a need and a demand for it. We've done some scientific studies that suggest compared to matched controls (not fully randomized studies) that the course has its intended impacts, either virtually or live.

Wendy Hasenkamp (43:51): Oh, because did it start during COVID? Or it was continued during COVID?

Rob Roeser (43:54): We had two years prior to COVID where we did a live study. And then COVID descended, so we did a virtual quasi-experimental study. We did a little follow-up into the COVID period and showed that the depression and anxiety was a bit more attenuated among those who had taken the class.

(44:15) And then the final study that was really important for those who are listening who might be interested in it was, we showed that the instructors in the three universities taught it rather differently, and yet it was like three train lines ending up at Grand Central Station. That they achieved the same outcomes even though they came at the material from a different direction. And this is sort of the whole point that, could we create a course that we could give to a neuroscientist like you, or a developmental scientist, or a Buddhist scholar, and they could make that course work in the direction of who they are for their students? So I think that's the hopeful message there, although it needs more evidence to be born out as true.

Wendy Hasenkamp (45:00): I'm thinking back to what we were speaking about earlier about the role of culture and community, and absorbing norms from those around you. And so to what extent, in your experience... there's the culture of the university where the students are embedded, and I guess at that point it's less about their parents or their home setting, but it's about the school. So how do you see that

container influencing the work, for example of a specific course, and the impact on the students, versus the larger community who's holding the container, I guess?

Rob Roeser (45:44): Yeah. See, Wendy has taken all these classes, so she's a systems thinker. *[laughter]* So as my colleague used to say, we should always be quite interested in the systems above and below the one that we're looking at, because that's providing constraining and affording factors. And I'll just say one thing. There was this guy once upon a time, a Yale psychologist named Seymour Sarason, and he wrote a very thin book called *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*. 1991. He was, I think, frustrated with all of the work they had done and that produced more of the same.

(46:23) But the key idea in this book is that, if we do not create the conditions for educators' growth and learning that we wish for the educators to create for their students, then we will be engaged in the predictable failure of educational reform. And so at Penn State and at Wisconsin, what we tried to do then is to create teacher communities of practice, professional learning communities. So as more people come online to teach the course, we're working together to help each other.

(47:00) It would be great if this work were moved to higher levels at places like UVA, where that's happening, where this becomes kind of just a part and parcel of a mission and a culture and what we do. And that resources and support and words followed that. And I think that's part of the aspiration, is to try to move flourishing, sort of like back in the Nalanda tradition in the area of India many millennia ago, to really think about flourishing for self, others, and the planet as the center of what a place of learning should be about.

(47:36) And that's what I think Matt's place was about. And that's what I think, not totally, but if we can create a little bit of finding our place in the universe, finding our unique gifts, caring about each other, engaging in beauty and the creation of artwork... If we can create schools that are around those kinds of ideas of emotional awe and elevation and interdependence—whether that's a preschool or primary school, a secondary school or a university like Penn State—maybe our whole future depends on it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (48:12): It's such a beautiful example of... Thinking about societal transformation with this lens of, educational settings are such a lever, where you can have a lot of influence there. And working at multiple levels of what you teach students, and then what you teach teachers, and how do you shift a culture and community around that to hold the space. It really has much larger implications outside of just educational contexts.

Rob Roeser (48:47): And I would say, Wendy, one of the things that Mind & Life over the last... period of time, that we've thought about a lot is the different modes and methods of social change, social activism, community change. And I think that's the conversation that we really need to be thinking about—strategies for deep and systemic social change. And I think education is a very complex, long-term intergenerational one that's really important. And I think there are many others that are equally important. So it's hopeful, and it's such a large system that it's challenging.

Wendy Hasenkamp (49:31): Well, I so appreciate all the work you're doing, and I think it's so... You're bringing essential emphases that have been lacking, particularly around our fundamental interconnection and interdependence, and how we can instill that understanding. And also, you're not afraid to use the word "love" in what we're trying to teach. I've seen you use that in several writings, and I just want to appreciate you for that. And really just thank you for all the great work that you've been doing in this space. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you wanted to chat about?

Rob Roeser ([50:12](#)): First of all, thank you so much for that. I'll just say I really appreciate your kindness and your compliment, because I am not saying that love is the full extent of education. But boy, without love, it's a different kind of learning, as we know. And there are many forms of learning, just like there's many forms of wine. And we should choose very carefully which one we serve.

([50:39](#)) And I can't think of... I'll just say one other thing. The university, the Great One Turning, what is the university about? What is the curriculum? This is John Dewey. It is the collective efforts of all human beings through all time to understand themselves and the universe. I love learning, and I think learning, reading, seeing distant possibilities... These are such great gifts that we've inherited, and I hope that we can re-enchant them somehow in our time.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([51:12](#)): Well, thank you so much, Rob. This has been a real joy. I appreciate you taking the time.

Rob Roeser ([51:17](#)): Yes, Wendy. Thank you so much. It was great being with you.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([51:25](#)): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcasts.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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