Chapter 6

Mindfulness in Academia

Mindfulness in Academia: On the Fine Art of Intellectual Labor

Beth Ann Muellner

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BREATHE.

Inhale.
Exhale.
Inhale.
Exhale.

BREATHE.

If you do not begin each task this way, no matter how big or how small, you should. This is my mantra. I try sometimes to imagine Carmen Sylva, aka Queen Elisabeth of Romania, the subject of the book I've been writing for the past eight years, beginning her multitudinous daily

tasks this way—from writing the over fifty books she produced during her lifetime (1843–1916), to helping her husband King Carol I of Romania govern a newly constituted Romania, to running the several charitable organizations she founded—all the while trying in vain to produce a male heir to the throne. How else to survive but by taking deep breaths?

In my own intellectual labor, I would like to say I learned breathing exercises from Ruth-Ellen, but I did not. In my memory, she was the epitome of the busy professor, always producing, always thinking, always running from one thing to the next. Short on breath, but long on insight. But neither should I have expected to learn correct breathing techniques from her: it is a discovery that needs to be made alone, by turning inward (*Pratyahara*), practicing solitude (*kaivalya*), and quieting the mind (*citta-vrtti-nirodha*), as suggested by second-century BCE yogic scholar Pantañjali. I include the Sanskrit words here to acknowledge the gaps that exist in translation, and in the historical and geographical distance of yoga's Vedic origins from my full comprehension of these concepts as a white, western woman of privilege. The practice of acknowledging those who came before me, as well as recognizing my own position in this hierarchy of learning, is something I did learn from Ruth-Ellen. And, despite the perception that white western women have killed yoga, at least according to the insightful series of 2019 podcasts entitled *Yoga is Dead* by the Indigenous practitioners Jesal Parikh and Tesal Patel, I am determined to learn better and to honor yoga's history and traditions. My pursuit of a meaningful yoga practice persists because the positive energy it brings far outweighs the negative, starting with the reminder to just take a deep breath when beginning any task. Like writing this essay.

BREATHE.

After over twenty years of teaching German language and culture, sixteen of those at a small liberal arts college in the heart of a politically red state in the US, the practice of breathing deeply, of forming my body into shapes (*asanas*) that might defy its age, and of meditating to calm the mind have come in handy many times. I began yoga while pregnant and in graduate school, with Ruth-Ellen as my dissertation advisor, and have continued the physical practice during my entire academic career. In 2017, I completed a two-hundred-hour teacher training course to help others learn about yoga's benefits, and I have been teaching to

faculty colleagues and staff at my college since then, alongside my other teaching obligations in German. My yoga teaching weaves throughout our campus in unexpected ways, as well as into my professional life more widely: I guide my beginning German classes through yoga asanas to learn body vocabulary and the command form; I lead neuroscience majors through the physical practice of yoga to accompany their theoretical and scientific focus in the seminar "Stress and the Brain;" I lead our college trustees in yoga stretches during the lunch hour during their campus meetings; at our annual Coalition of Women in German (WiG) conference, I offer yoga stretching to balance our days of intense listening and dialoguing. But why do I begin my contribution to this Festschrift celebrating Ruth-Ellen on breathing and yoga? Because Ruth-Ellen's ability to weave the personal and the professional parallels the holistic approach to my career that yoga has taught me.

Ruth-Ellen excels at embedding personal reflection and experience within her scholarly writing. In her 1992 *Women in German Yearbook* article "'Language is Also a Place of Struggle,'" she began with a personal reflection on the contradictions of working as a feminist in the *male domain* of *Germanistik*; in her 2015 co-edited publication *On the Future of Scholarly Writing,* she and Angelika Bammer reflected on the increasing importance of the *how* of scholarly writing next to the *what* of scholarly writing. Each chapter of the volume focuses on the meaning of writing in different disciplines, with an emphasis on how academic writing can be made more accessible, particularly for mainstream audiences in this era of questioning the importance of disciplines (especially in the humanities) in higher education in general. How fitting that the essays in this Festschrift, a genre that has seemingly fallen from grace, are pushing creative boundaries by newly defining what a Festschrift can be. I dare say that Ruth-Ellen's influence has struck again.

That this Festschrift should redefine the genre is very much in keeping with the feminist academic practices that its authors learned from Ruth-Ellen, beginning with always questioning and pushing boundaries. Much of Ruth-Ellen's scholarly writing was about the very art and practice of writing itself, and she frequently emphasized words and their meanings: in her contributing essay in *On the Future of Scholarly Writing,* "Found in the Details," she ponders the word "detail." In her 1998 book *Respectability and Deviance* on nineteenth-century women writers, she investigates meanings for the German words *Beruf* (profession/calling), *Wissenschaft* (theoretical knowledge), *Wirtschaft* (practical knowledge), and *Arbeit* (work). Her habit of allowing the

personal and professional to dynamically coexist in her writing becomes evident in her penchant for dialoguing with herself, asking questions and offering answers in an almost conversational tone.

I am struck by how much Ruth-Ellen's influence reaches into my own scholarship, in my own boundary pushing, insisting on making space for mindfulness practices within my teaching and academic responsibilities, as well as in giving clearer definition to women's lives and writing. When I stumbled upon Carmen Sylva during my research on the Habsburg Empress Elisabeth, I was surprised how often Sylva mentioned work and how often the theme of labor, especially women's duties, came up in her autobiographical writings, a subject that seemed antithetical to the life of a queen, especially in comparison to Empress Elisabeth, who seemed to desire nothing less than to escape her duties. Sylva repeatedly emphasized the craft and labor of writing in her texts. Thus, in the three-way conversation between Ruth-Ellen, the poet-queen Carmen Sylva, and myself that follows, we ruminate together on the ways that the personal and the professional converge, and on the meanings and importance of the intellectual work of writing and reading.

RUTH-ELLEN: Beth, tell me what have you been up to recently?

BETH: I have spent roughly the past eight years writing a book that will introduce the oeuvre of poet queen Carmen Sylva (1843–1916), also known as Queen Elisabeth of Romania, to English-speaking audiences.

RUTH-ELLEN: What prompted your interest in Sylva? Tell me about that.

BETH: [B R E A T H E]. Well, I have to admit that I was first drawn to Sylva's unusual penchant for having herself photographed posing as seamstress, weaver, composer, writer, and painter throughout her castle, reflecting what seemed to be the queen's obsession with mimicking aspects of labor.

SYLVA: I did not *mimic* labor! I labored!

BETH: Yes, true, but I was still struck by the number of photographs that you had made of yourself in which you performed some kind of activity—where you specifically did *not* sit idly in front of the camera as did so many other nineteenth-century photographic subjects.

SYLVA: Well, if you're going to talk about my self-images as performance, let me point out that someone had to set the record straight. Since birth no one really ever saw me for who I truly was. In my day … "it was to many quite a shocking idea, that a princess should not merely have the misfortune to be born a poet, but that she should actually take no pains to conceal so terrible a fact! That sort of talent really could not be considered suitable to one's station, and where there was no possibility of extirpating [it], it must be at least hidden away out of sight!" (Sylva, *From Memory's* 108).

BETH: Well, certainly you did not hide your talent, especially given the over fifty volumes of poetry and prose that you produced. I must admit though, I have fallen prey from time to time to my own prejudice over the categorization of your writing as *Trivialliteratur* or to accusations that you emphasized quantity over quality.

SYLVA: Trivial or not, it sold to eager audiences. My fairy tales about the Romanian landscape, *Peleschmärchen* (1882–1887), to offer one example of many, were highly popular in Romania, Germany, England, and the United States as well as around the world, and they were translated into numerous languages.

RUTH-ELLEN: Yes, but you were a queen. Isn't it obvious that your work would have been published?

SYLVA: On the contrary! I worked ceaselessly to get my work published, an effort you can hardly imagine, given the prejudice against women pursuing intellectual work.

RUTH-ELLEN: Actually, I can imagine that quite well.

SYLVA: At one of the many tedious social gatherings that my ladies and I were forced to endure, all dolled-up in the most uncomfort-

able gowns, my most-trusted lady-of-the-court, Hélène Văcărescu, overheard my husband's Hohenzollern cousin Wilhelm II say: "… to me a woman who writes is a being who is absurd, ridiculous … [c]lever women are dangerous women, one and all, who ought to be muzzled before they can bite …" (Văcărescu 137).

RUTH-ELLEN: Ah, writing—that deviant behavior! Well, I hope you got some good "bites" in.

SYLVA: I did indeed. I wrote a whole book of aphorisms, some more biting than others. But one thing I've always said is: "Schreib nicht, wenn du's lassen kannst" ("Don't write if you can help it"; my trans.; Sylva, *Gedanken* 72).

BETH: Yes, writing is hard, and even more so when women have to constantly prove themselves as writers—or as having the ability to think at all. In her memoir *Mein Penatenwinkel,* for example, Sylva wrote extensively about the boredom that her grandmother endured, expected to stand around like a silent ornament while the men conversed. But what intrigues me as well is the way in which Sylva constructs her self-image as an intellectual laborer, which I first glimpsed in the photographs.

SYLVA: Creating that image was part of the reason why I had the photographs made. Of course, people were always curious about royalty, and we were often in the tabloids, so I should admit that I *did* have a ready audience. But I wanted people to better understand what it meant to be a working queen. And some might say that everything that I pursued creatively and intellectually—from writing stories, to illuminating manuscripts, to holding regular salons in which I featured and promoted the work of Romanian musicians—I did to support my husband's efforts to build a new Romania. Even my former literary collaborator and lady-in-waiting Mite Kremnitz claimed that "[t]he positive achievements of the king to bring fame to Romania pale in comparison to those of Romania's first queen" (my trans.; Kremnitz 1). But this wasn't necessarily the way the king or his advisors saw it. Most of my projects were considered private initiatives, and I received no official budget for them. By selling photographs and publishing stories, I was able to fund charitable pursuits such as the

organization *Concordia* that I established in 1885. It promoted the art of weaving, spinning, and silk production of local (primarily female) artisans.

BETH: And the artistry of Romanian embroidery is widely recognized today. I bought a beautiful, embroidered blouse a few years ago when I was visiting the places where Sylva lived.

RUTH-ELLEN: I am often struck by how often the art of needlework and that of writing overlap in different ways, as in the example of women writers disparagingly reported about as preoccupied with knitting in the farcical *Protocol and Report of the First Meeting of German Women Writers, Held at Weimar in 1846* that opened my book *Respectability and Deviance.*

SYLVA: Yes, "[s]ome men don't like when the ladies work. It is a mistake." My first response is that needlework "is so much better than their smoking; it is so unobtrusive" … and secondly, it is such "a help when in conversation we do not wish to contradict; we seem to grow silent over some intricate bit of work, and none can guess the little volcano that is covered with the lava of our work" (Elisabeth, *Art of Tatting* x).

RUTH-ELLEN: The contradictions between deviance and conformity that you talk about remind me of the aristocratic and bourgeois German women writers that I know so well, like Bettina von Arnim and Louise Otto-Peters.

BETH: Indeed! I also find it striking that women are almost always the primary protagonists in Sylva's stories: mothers, daughters, grandmothers, sisters, widows, divorced women, childless women, women of leisure, and women who work. Work was a constant theme in her writing as well. For example, in *Handwerkerlieder* (1891; originally appearing in English as *Songs of Toil* in 1887), she glorifies various trades and crafts; in the fairy tale *Furnica* (1883, originally translated into English in 1889), an industrious young girl elects to become queen of an ant colony and to sever all ties to humanity; in the memoir *Mein Penatenwinkel* (1907, translated into English in 1911 as *From Memory's Shrine*), Sylva emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between all occupants of the royal

household, devoting the same amount of reflection to the work of butlers or governesses as to certain well-known visitors, such as her piano teacher, Clara Schumann.

SYLVA: Oh, how I loved Frau Schumann! Now there's a woman who understood the importance of earning money with her artistic talents, although it was really out of necessity, due to her husband's early death. I had it easier in some ways, but I don't know what I would have done as a child without the servants. It was they who often rescued me from the "Reitpeitsche" (riding crop) and "Zwangsjacke" (straitjacket) that were used to quiet me as a girl, for I was unusually lively. Due to my own strict upbringing, I later became quite outspoken about educational reform, particularly regarding the importance of storytelling and fantasy in children's lives. And my governess, "unser Fräulchen," whose real name was Fanny Lavater, taught me how to navigate the complicated world of castle living (Sylva, *From Memory's* 97). "How people could often be so at odds, constantly feeling hurt, feeling resentment, with their hatred and arguments and not getting along! That is no fun in a lonesome castle…. Such a castle is really a world unto itself!" (Sylva, *From Memory's* 94).

RUTH-ELLEN: I am curious about that though. In *A Room of One's Own,* Virginia Woolf wrote that women of the nobility were often "shut up in their parks among their folios … solitary great ladies …" as compared with an "unknown Miss Austen or a Miss Brontë" having to share a sitting room, be constantly interrupted, and to hide their prose whenever someone walked into the room (Woolf 95, 87).

SYLVA: Well, "[t]he Prince likes to find me at every free moment he has, and so I am always at home. He must never notice that I am at work. When he calls or I hear his footsteps, pen and paintbrush are thrown away till he does not want me any more" (Stackelberg 200–1).

RUTH-ELLEN: So, what you're saying essentially is that a queen also needs "a room of her own"?

SYVLA: Yes, but "[i]t should actually be quite small—the big luxury in the castle made my work at the beginning quite challenging,

especially after the thirteen years we [Sylva and husband Carol] spent in the cloister, in small, white-plastered rooms. I read about myself, that it must be easy to write in such an inspiring environment [of Peleș castle]. How people err! I wrote 'Jehova' and 'Hexe' in a cell that was four feet wide, with almost no light, and in which it was so damp that I had to keep my feet on a block so that they wouldn't get moldy" (my trans.; Sommer 18).

BETH: The theme of space seems to pop up frequently in your writing. You focused so much on the *where* of writing. Can you tell us why?

SYLVA: I moved about quite a bit in my life, from the Monrepos palace in Neuwied, Germany, where I grew up, to the palace in Bucharest when I got married, to the cloister I mentioned in Sinaia during the construction of our summer residence in the Carpathian Mountains, and finally, to the opulent rooms of the Castle Peleș. I also spent two years in exile in Italy, forced out of Romania due to the perception that I was meddling in state affairs. And even though I was the Queen of Romania, I was never given citizenship there. So much for what it means to be Queen and the power the title evokes.

BETH: I see connections between the way that Sylva describes space and the way feminist spatial theorists like Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, and Chandra Mohanty discuss space as a social construct that is often at odds with itself, as a place of both refuge and confinement, of both unity and loneliness, and of both security and surveillance.

RUTH-ELLEN: Hmmm. Can you say more about that?

BETH: One notable example is Sylva's play *Meister Manole* (1892), based on the Balkan folktale of "The Walled-Up Wife," in which a woman literally becomes enclosed in a structure's walls. The Balkan legend insists that a "construction sacrifice" is necessary to keep the walls from tumbling down each evening. Sylva clearly identified with such an existence, writing: "[i]t is a strange prisoner-like existence on the throne; one is always closed in and at home …" (Sommer 53). Because the entombed woman happens to be the fertile, nursing wife of a brilliant architect, artistic

sacrifice becomes part of the narrative. Like Manole, who must sacrifice his wife so that his structure can stand, Sylva's artistic creativity burst forth after her daughter's death and despite her subsequent miscarriages. And given Sylva's penchant for building autobiographical details into most of the stories she wrote, she calls specific attention to the conception scandal that plagued her marriage and duty as queen in the play.

SYLVA: Well, I couldn't pass up that opportunity. The irony of a folktale that featured a fertile mother who became walled-in hit close to home. I was essentially a walled-up queen who remained childless. And as I always said: "Le métier de souveraine n'exige que trois qualities: la beauté, la bonté, la fécondité" ("The job of a queen demands only three qualities: beauty, goodness, and fertility"; my trans.; Sylva, *Les pensées 147*).

BETH: Your ironic tone in that aphorism is not lost on us, especially when I read that you lost your only daughter when she was just four, and then suffered seventeen or eighteen miscarriages in your efforts to secure an heir to the throne. I am so sorry for these losses.

SYLVA: Well, first, thank you for acknowledging them. That is something I never experienced from the court. In fact, the king's advisors considered it *my* fault for not producing an heir. They thought that my intellectual activities were compromising my body's energies to conceive! Can you believe that?

RUTH-ELLEN: Oh yes, that is no surprise. We know that the nineteenth-century male medical establishment cut women no slack. None of them ever really understood women's bodies to begin with, nor were they inclined to consider the possibility of male infertility.

SYLVA: Well, this is exactly what I indicated in *Meister Manole,* which only had a short run in Vienna. Even so, there it was on stage: my princess-character declared quite openly that it was her husband's "corrupted seed" that was the problem, and that she would no longer attempt to conceive. I always did believe that all this aristocratic in-breeding was a problem.

RUTH-ELLEN: Well, that is a pretty bold claim for someone who pursues needlework so as not to speak out-of-turn!

SYLVA: Oh, I had my moments. But primarily, I found comfort in the written word, always. As I wrote to a friend: "thank God, the genius of poetry goes secretly with me to the audiences, to the forests, to the schools, to dinners, too, etc." (Stackelberg 200–1). I would have lost my mind of loneliness or sheer boredom otherwise.

BETH: Indeed. Walled-up, or in confinement due to a global pandemic, with literature and writing, we can never really be alone.

RUTH-ELLEN: I couldn't agree more!

And here we all E X H A L E.

In the many hours I've spent thinking about Sylva and her life, I often wondered if yoga ever entered the conversation. It's not a far stretch, really. Due to the illnesses suffered by her mother and her youngest brother, her family was interested in all sorts of alternative healing practices. After her mother's lameness was healed through the practice of touch (akin to Reiki), she herself became a sought-after healer and converted one of the family palaces into a hospital. Furthermore, the practice of yoga became a hit in the US with the introduction of it by Swami Vivekananda at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, about which Sylva may well have known, as an avid follower of various World's Fairs (she even won a prize at one for a tatting stitch). Much earlier, however, European interest in and knowledge of India (and yoga) came with German Sanskrit scholar and world-traveler Georg Forster's (1754–1794) published writings, and so it is possible that Sylva would have encountered the idea of yoga through her keen interest in reading seemingly everything. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century, different reform movements were coming into vogue, including the new *Turnbewegung* in 1807 with Friedrich Ludwig Jahn. Perhaps inspired by her friend Empress Elisabeth of Austria, who

was an avid sportswoman herself (an equestrian and extreme hiker), one of Sylva's favorite activities was to invite all the castle's visitors on extensive hikes through the surrounding countryside near Peleș Castle. These excursions are captured in group photographs with large numbers of hikers with backpacks and walking sticks at the ready, posing against a hill, frequently with Sylva at the top. Thus, the theme of exercise presents a future angle to consider in Sylva's writings. For now, it is fun to consider the dream of work-life balance for all of us, even though it gets complicated when comparing Sylva's much slower-paced life with that of Ruth-Ellen's and mine. Hard to imagine what Sylva would have said about our practices today. I guess that's fodder for another imaginary dialogue.

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