

# Experiences of Silence

An exploration of peoples' experiences of intentional silence

by

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# Abstract

Guided by literature that suggests that mindfulness practices can be used to cultivate cognitive flexibility, creative thinking, compassion and a sense of interconnectedness, this study explored peoples experiences of opportunities for silence in a university student leadership program focused on sustainability. Guided by the research question: *What are participants' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the Sustainability Leadership Certificate program?*, this research explored experiences of intentional silence as an example of mindfulness practice. This study drew on Grounded Theory and Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) in its analysis and presentation of the findings.

The Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program at Dalhousie University's College of Sustainability incorporates intentional silence into its programming with the goal of creating skilled, motivated leaders committed to actions of sustainability. Participants of the SLC were asked to reflect on their experiences of two, thirty-second moments of silence within the SLC's programming. Overall, participants felt appreciative of the opportunities to be silent and expressed an increased ability to absorb what they were learning, to engage with the material, and to take the silences as breaks from a mentally and socially demanding learning experience. Participants reflected on their experiences within three layers of context: their personal context; their immediate surroundings; and abstract concepts of the value of silence, mindfulness, reflection and more. These layers of context are explored as being *nested* within one another. A parallel is discussed, of people's experiences of sustainability challenges and experiences of silence. It is possible that mindfulness practices such as intentional silence can be used as the bridge between theory and action, enabling and inspiring people to develop a personal practice of mindfully enacted sustainability.

**Key terms:** mindfulness practices, sustainability, intentional silence, Creative Analytic Practice (CAP), cognitive flexibility, Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC), pedagogy, interconnectedness

# Chapter One: Introduction

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Why are you so afraid of silence,  
silence is the root of everything.

If you spiral into its void  
a hundred voices will thunder  
messages you long to hear.

—Rumi: *Hidden Music* (translation by Mafi, 2002)

## Introduction

*Intentional silence as a tool for engaging in the work of sustainability.*

Addressing issues relating to sustainability requires individuals to develop the intellectual, or cognitive skills necessary to think through complexity, as well as the motivation to commit to the challenge at hand on a personal level and on an ongoing basis (Moore, 2009; Scott, 1962; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Mindfulness practices such as intentional silence—being silent with an intended purpose—have been studied as a means of cultivating both the intellectual skills and the personal motivation that together could enable and inspire people to engage with sustainability issues in an inspired, committed and effective manner. These intellectual skills consist of cognitive flexibility, and the ability to think outside of one's usual mental models (Senge, 2013; Moore, 2009). Personal motivation may be fostered by the cultivation of empathy, compassion and an awareness and appreciation of our connectedness with our surroundings and thus a desire to live in a way that nurtures our surroundings: to live

sustainably (Alerby & Elidottir, 2003; Manes, 1992; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). Research suggests that mindfulness practices such as intentional silence can help to cultivate these skills and forms of awareness.

The participants of the Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program are encouraged to engage in intentional silence as a way of enriching their learning and developing their competencies as leaders and agents of sustainable environmental and social change (College of Sustainability, "SLC: About", n.d.). This research focused on two, roughly thirty-second intervals of silence within this program, and was guided by the research question: *What are participants' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program?* This study sought to provide insight about how one group of students reflected upon opportunities for intentional silence within the context of learning to engage complex issues relating to sustainability.

### **Problem context**

The sustainability movement has been growing as a response to environmental issues such as global climate change and access to natural resources since the term "sustainable development" was first put on the public radar during the Brundtland Commission in 1987 (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). Sustainability can be defined in a multitude of ways, but refers generally to meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations Brundtland Report, 1987, IV. Conclusions). Because sustainability is often understood to combine environmental, social and economic health, issues of sustainability are complex and often overwhelm conceptual categories, blurring the lines between environmental and social justice, economic and ecological well-being (Anderson & Berglund, 2003). Addressing these inherently complex issues can be seen as an *intellectual challenge*, requiring creative new models of thinking, as well as a

*personal challenge*, requiring an ongoing commitment to the work of sustainability (Brown, Harris & Russell, 2010; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Midgely, 1995).

Brown et al. (2010) articulate the sense of despair, or becoming overwhelmed, that many people feel when confronting issues of sustainability such as global climate change or our reliance on unsustainable fossil fuels. Such issues, or challenges, are characterized by complex social, environmental and political implications and have for this reason been called “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems demand new ways of thinking, of problem-solving and of imagining solutions, and characteristically have no single solution (Rittel & Webber).

### **Purpose of the study and research question**

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into how one group of people experienced intentional silence while learning to approach complexity and to engage in—and inspire others to engage in—the work of sustainability. This study drew on the reflections of participants' experiences of silence within the Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program at Dalhousie University's College of Sustainability. Using a qualitative questionnaire, this study asked participants to reflect on their experiences of intentional silence within the program, particularly focusing on two, thirty-second moments of silence. This study was guided by the Research Question: *What are participants' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program?*

### **Significance of the study**

*The gap in the literature: intentional silence as a tool for the work of sustainability*

Mindfulness practices such as intentional silence are currently resurgent in popular culture (Kaza, 2008; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2004). The relevant literature exploring mindfulness practices falls largely into two categories. One body

explores mindfulness as a way to cultivate creative thinking and cognitive flexibility, suggesting that these skills help to confront complexity and paradox (Brown et al., 2010; Senge et al., 2004). The other body of literature explores mindfulness as a way to cultivate empathy, compassion and a sense of interconnectedness: skills that may help people to engage in ongoing work or service (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009; Manes, 1992; Kaza 2008). This study seeks to explore the possibility that these skills could be central to the inner (personal) and outer (professional) work of engaging with sustainability challenges, in doing so exploring the gap in the literature and the possible connection between the skills associated with mindfulness practices and the challenges inherent in sustainability challenges.

By focusing on reflections of intentional silence as experienced by a group of students who are learning new ways of thinking and problem solving as well as learning how to inspire an ongoing commitment to sustainability in themselves and others, this research brings together two bodies of literature and addresses the gap in between them. This study addresses this gap by providing insight into participants' experiences of intentional silence in the SLC program: a program that employs mindfulness practices to help participants to understand complexity and develop personal skills in the context of sustainability.

### *Situating the research within the context of sustainability*

This research seeks to explore a method of overcoming some of the central challenges that characterize the work of sustainability: complexity, paradox, wicked problems and the ability to compassionately connect with others and commit to a demanding path of living sustainably on a personal level. By analyzing individuals' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within sustainability-related education, this study seeks to explore the potential for a connection between the various layers of context in which people experience

intentional silence, and those through which people experience issues of sustainability and the challenges therein.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

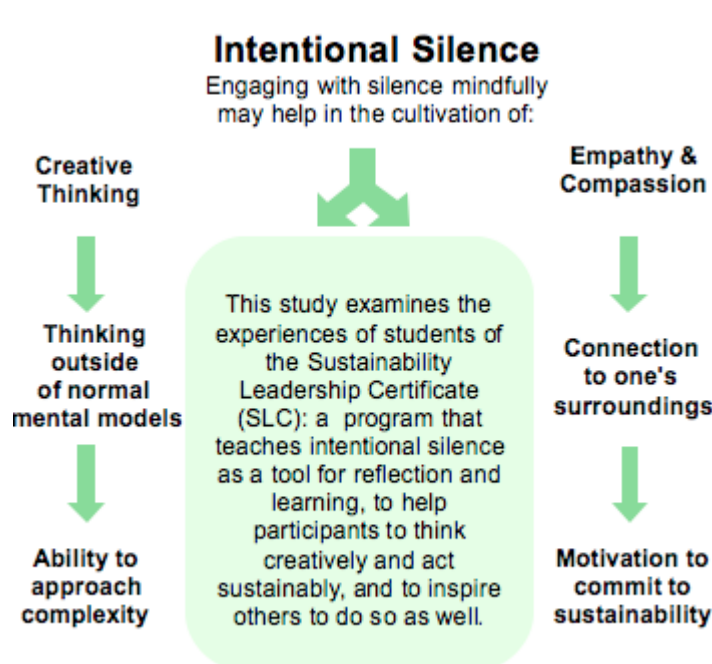
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“Literature can remind us that not all life is already written down:  
there are still so many stories to be told.”  
—Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*

## Defining mindfulness & introducing the literature

The literature reviewed in this research addresses two areas of study, both of which explore the use of intentional silence and other mindfulness practices, as a tool for cultivating the skills and awareness necessary to address issues of sustainability. The image below demonstrates the streams of skills associated with practicing intentional silence, a form of mindfulness practice.

Figure 1: The potential benefits of intentional silence





Within the context of this research, mindfulness refers to moment-to-moment, judgement-free awareness, while practicing mindfulness refers to a conscious effort to develop such awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness is a state of mind and body that is characterized by calm, acute awareness of one's internal self and external surroundings, physical, emotional and other. Mindfulness practices refer to any practice—such as intentional silence, reflection or meditation—that is intended to help cultivate mindfulness (Zajonc, 2013). Both bodies of literature reviewed in this study examine mindfulness and mindfulness practices, often in the form of intentional silence.

**The first body of literature** explores mindfulness as a tool for cultivating certain intellectual, or cognitive skills, within the context of learning and pedagogy (methods and practices of teaching). Scholars assert that mindfulness practices—such as reflection and intentional silence—within educational programming can contribute to creative thinking, engaged learning and an increased ability to absorb knowledge (Alerby & Elidottir, 2003; Senge, 2013; Senge et al., 2004; Wildman, 1988). Research suggests that such skills are critical in developing cognitive flexibility—the ability to think outside of one's usual mental models—and the capacity to understand the complexity inherent in issues relating to sustainability (Scott, 1962; Moore, 2009; Zajonc, 2013).

**The second body of literature** explores how mindfulness practices can be incorporated into philosophical/world perspectives, human-and-nature narratives, and the workplace in order to cultivate empathy, compassion and a sense of and *value for* the interconnectedness of one's self with one's environment (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009; Senge et al. 2004). The ability to empathize with others—putting oneself in another's shoes—allows one to critically evaluate aspects of one's own life from another perspective (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004), while a compassionate connection to the experiences of others helps to cultivate a desire to work towards their wellbeing (Senge, 2013). Finally, an understanding and value of the way in which one is connected with one's

surroundings can inspire individuals to commit to a personal path of sustainability (Kaza, 2008; Manes, 1992; Senge et al. 2004; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009).

These two bodies of literature often overlap. I contextualize them within a broader discussion of silence, beginning with perspectives of silence from popular literature, giving a cross-cultural, historical context to intentional silence and other mindfulness practices, as well as examining perspectives of silence as oppression and empowerment (Wildman, 1988). I end by addressing what I perceive to be the gap in the literature that this study seeks to address.

### **Intentional silence over time and culture**

Humans have been reflecting on their experiences of silence over time and culture through mysticism, poetry, religious and spiritual disciplines as well as undocumented individual experiences and, relatively recently, within the framework of the western scientific method (Capra, 2010). Within this wealth of knowledge and experience are disciplined practices of intentional silence as a means of intellectual, spiritual training and development. Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and countless other belief systems value notions of silence, stillness and quiet as important for any life path or profession. These teachings, while varied in cultural backdrop, agree that such practices of intentional silence—often associated with the development of mindfulness—can help to cultivate certain abilities (Capra, 2010; Senge, 2013; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). These abilities include: compassion and empathy; deep listening; the ability to let go of one's own agenda and ego and, in doing so, to overcome the notion of the Other, thus bringing about an intimate sense of interconnectedness with, and care for one's surroundings: human and non-human; biotic (living) and abiotic (none-living) (Capra, 2010; Senge, 2013; Senge et al. 2004).

*East to West: ancient practices in contemporary academia*

Zembylas & Michaelides (2004) examine Eastern as well as Western notions of silence. They articulate the cross-culturally, historically recognized value of silence as a practice that can help practitioners to cultivate compassion, self criticality and a deep sense of connection to the Other, once teachers and students both embrace the unknowable (Zembylas & Michaelides, p. 192). Their research begins with a critical reading of Western and Eastern traditions of silence that then informs a discussion of the pedagogical values of silence. This research is an example of traditional teachings associated with the East being incorporated into Western thinking. This is also evident in schools of thought such as Deep Ecology (Naess, 1986) and Whole Earth Thinking (Kaza, 2008): philosophies that have developed alternative models of pedagogy, ecology and environmental philosophy, and discuss the importance of developing a deeply personal practice of engaged, sustainable living through silence and mindfulness.

*A path towards sustainable living*

In her book *Mindfully Green*, Kaza outlines what she calls the Green Practice Path. She outlines how to develop a path of ecological mindfulness and action, beginning in the personal sphere and expanding to one's relations with one's immediate surroundings and eventually to the world/universe. This path first involves the personal cultivation of "green principles", such as reducing harm to others, being with the suffering of others and embracing a "deep view" of ecology (Kaza, 2008, p. xii). This is followed by an outline of ways of entering into a life of engaged, skillful sustainability action: manifesting one's green principles. The third and final step in Kaza's green practice path encourages the development of a personal connection to and awareness of the ecological system in which one lives. Kaza suggests silence as a tool to develop awareness of the health and pollution of ecosystems as well as of one's own

desires and motivations that can distract and encourage us on our paths. Kaza cites lessons learned working with students, other educators and her lifetime of work with environmental organizations (Kaza, 2008).

While few scholars have so specifically identified silence and mindfulness as tools to move towards holistic sustainable living as Kaza has done, others have explored the use of such practices within a broader framework. Such are the studies discussed herein, focused on mindfulness as a tool in teaching and learning.

### **Intentional silence as mindfulness: mindfulness as a pedagogical aid**

Mindfulness practices may help to develop awareness, both of oneself and of one's surroundings. Developing this awareness may enable one to step, or to think, outside of one's usual perspectives and mental models, thus developing cognitive flexibility. Scholars have studied intentional silence—among other forms of mindfulness practice—as an educational tool to help students in a variety of ways: from engaging in class discussion to absorbing complex concepts and creating space for reflection and illuminating “Aha!” moments. The following section seeks to explore some of what is known in the academic literature about silence as a pedagogical aid. Throughout, connections are drawn to the current research and how mindfulness practices such as silence may be useful to people seeking to engage with issues of sustainability.

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## **Part I: Mindfulness and intentional silence: tools to cultivate creative thinking, cognitive flexibility and to help approach complexity**

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### **Silence: a tool for sense-making and creativity**

Alerby & Elidottir (2003) identify multiple uses for silence, articulating how silence can be used as a sense-making process that is key to understanding new concepts. Their research draws on linguistic, historical and philosophical analyses of silence, exploring the etymology (roots) of the word itself, as well as methods of improving teaching practices with the use of silence. In their study, teachers were given time and space for reflection, and found that this practice resulted in “not only a competence development, but also a personal development” (p. 48). Loughran (1996) conducted research of what he refers to as “wait-times”: periods of silence used in class settings to allow students the time to reflect and respond before the teacher provides an answer to a question. In these different examples, we can observe how silence can be introduced to a classroom for one purpose—providing the opportunity to reflect and respond more thoughtfully—yet can be experienced by different people in different ways, for example as a tool for capacity building, personal development, or a chance to reflect before responding to a teacher's question.

Zajonc (2013), explores mindfulness as a tool to engage in a creative process: itself a tool for approaching the complexity inherent in issues concerning sustainability. Sternberg & Davidson (1995), distinguish between four phases of the creative process, all of which, Zajonc defends, are enriched by meditation, a form of mindfulness practice similar to intentional silence. Zajonc asserts that meditation is needed first to confront the paradox, or wicked problem at hand, and later to allow space in one's thoughts for

the illuminating, “Aha!” moment (Zajonc, p. 85). Meditation is thus particularly useful for people seeking to understand wicked problems and what Zajonc describes as impossible polarities, such as are characteristic of sustainability challenges (Brown & Harris, 2010; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Zajonc, 2013). To approach such challenges can require a cycle of periods of creativity, reflection and concentrated work, all of which are fortified by mindfulness practice (Zajonc, 2013). This cycle is reflected in much of the SLC programming, which involves periods of creativity, reflection and demanding concentration.

### **Silence: a tool for developing cognitive flexibility and thinking outside of usual mental models**

Along with creative thinking, scholars have identified the need to be able to think outside of one's usual mental models in order to engage in complex issues of sustainability (Brown et al., 2010; Moore, 2009; Senge et al., 2004). Moore (2009) researched the differing levels of cognitive flexibility in inexperienced and experienced meditators. This research used two tests known as “the Stroop task (Stroop, 1935) and the d2-test of attention (Brickenkamp & Zilmer, 1998), [that test] participants' ability [...] to focus and direct their attention”, in combination with observations of participants' self-reported mindfulness (Moore, p. 176-177). This research found that people experienced in meditation “showed higher levels of mindfulness [...] and cognitive flexibility”, while those who were not experienced in meditation did not (Moore, p. 185). Moore's research asserts that there is a correlation between people who practice mindfulness and people with higher levels of cognitive flexibility and ability to focus and direct their attention. As observing intentional silence is a form of mindfulness practice, it is possible to extend that this practice too, can help people to develop such skills.

Senge et al. (2004), outline a process of ideating—idea making—that involves stepping back from one's own perspective, world view and ego in order to better see and thus relate to the Other – be it an other person, plant, culture or world view. Central to this process is the act of entering into intentional silence – a step that allows critical analysis of one's current ways of doing things (Senge et al., 2004). The authors describe how practicing intentional silence in this way can enable one to notice one's usual mental models, or ways of thinking and doing, while remaining open to new ways of approaching the matter at hand. Their research, informed by interviews with 150 scientists and entrepreneurs, was conducted at MIT University, and found that engaging in silence when dealing with complex problems and challenges lead students to deeper perceptions of reality and ensuing levels of action (Senge et al., 2004). Within the context of sustainability, this could mean deeper perceptions of ecological reality and ensuing levels of sustainability-actions. This research suggests the benefits of practicing intentional silence that are not exclusively intellectual, but also can lead to personal development. This is discussed further in the second body of literature.

### **Mindfulness as a tool for creative thinking, cognitive and complexity: conclusions**

This body of literature addressed how intentional silence and other mindfulness practices have been studied as tools for enhancing people's learning and cognitive flexibility, and thus their ability to think outside of their usual mental models and approach complexity with a well-developed creative process (Alerby & Elidottir, 2003; Zajonc, 2013; Moore, 2009), as well as the effects of mindfulness practices on one's ability to cultivate deep(-ecological) perceptions of reality and inspiration for ensuing levels of action (Senge et al., 2004). These skills provide resources to address the *intellectual* obstacles often confronted by those engaged in the work of sustainability. The next section addresses the skills mindfulness practices can help to cultivate that can

be used to address the *personal* obstacles often confronted when trying to engage in the work of sustainability.

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## **Part II: Mindfulness and intentional silence: tools to cultivate compassion, empathy and a sense of interconnectedness**

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Mindfulness practices such as intentional silence have been studied within a context of personal and inter-personal skills, namely, as a means of cultivating compassion, empathy and a sense of interconnectedness with one's surroundings: both human and non-human; living and non-living (Manes, 1992; Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). The following body of literature explores how narratives of humans-and-nature-relationships and systems thinking can be informed by mindfulness practices, resulting in the cultivation of qualities such as compassion, empathy and a sense of interconnectedness (Senge et al. 2004; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). This literature suggests, furthermore, that the cultivation of these may result in personal motivation to engage on an ongoing basis in the inner and outer, personal and professional, work of sustainability (Senge, 2013; Kaza, 2008).

### **Deep Ecology**

*Silence as a tool to inspire appreciation and reconnection with the intrinsic values of nature*

Deep Ecology is an ecological and environmental philosophy that seeks to address the roots of environmental and social problems by advocating the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs



(Drengson & Inoue, 1995; Manes, 1992). Manes explores the effects of engaging in silence through deep listening as a way of connecting with nature. Manes asserts that engaging with silence with the intention of listening to our natural surroundings reanimates the natural world for the listener and, as Manes quotes anthropologist Hans Duerr, “people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them” (Duerr, as quoted in Manes, p. 340). Here, Manes is making the connection between our awareness of our surroundings and our desire to “not exploit” them, or, to protect them: to live a life committed to harming our surroundings as little as possible. This is an important theme noted by scholars beyond the deep ecology perspective as well (Kaza 2008; Senge et al. 2004; Zembylas & Michaelides 2004; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). Deep Ecology suggests that when people take the opportunity to engage in silence and actively listen to the sounds around them, they can develop an increased appreciation of, and connection with, their (ecological) surroundings.

While Manes' Deep Ecology perspective helps us to understand how engaging in intentional silence can lead to a desire to care for one's surroundings, Tooth and Renshaw (2009), expand on this in their study of how an environmental narrative pedagogy—a method of education based on a story about the connectedness of humans and nature—can combine with opportunities for reflection to result in personal motivation to engage in the work of sustainability (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009).

### **Environmental narrative pedagogy**

#### *Engaging with the inner and outer work of sustainability through reflection*

Each person's personal narrative shapes their relationship to their surroundings and selves: their levels of motivation and commitment, sense of agency and ability, and experience of emotions and collective experiences (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). Thus, our narratives shape our sense of what is right and wrong, what we value and why. Tooth

and Renshaw conducted a year-long study across eight primary schools in Australia, focusing on narrative approaches to teaching that emphasized the interconnectedness of humans and nature. They found that an environmental narrative, combined with drama, deep attentive reflection and experiences in nature, helped students to develop a stronger, personal understanding of and value for the connections that exist between people, place and nature. Their findings support that the practice of reflection within the context of environmental-narrative pedagogy is key in inspiring students to engage with both the inner (personal) and outer (professional) work of sustainability (Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). Their way of incorporating environmental narrative with creative expression and reflection is similar to the the SLC model of learning, which shares the goal of inspiring its participants with various forms of reflection and creative expression to lead change and to take “effective sustainability actions” (College of Sustainability, “SLC: About”, n.d.).

## **Reflection and systems thinking**

### *Enriching problem-solving and reconnecting individuals with their surroundings*

MIT scholar Peter Senge discusses the important role of reflection in group work, in process-oriented projects and in re-establishing our sense of interconnectedness with who and what is around us (Senge, 2013). Senge suggests that by incorporating reflection into our work, we can shift from problem solving to creating, as well as better acknowledging our successes, thus building momentum in the process at hand.

Furthermore, by applying a practice of mindful reflection to social systems theory—a theory founded in the inter-relations of our ecological, social, cultural and physical surroundings—we are reminded of the important networks of relationships that enable ourselves and the systems around us to work (Parsons, 1951; Senge, 2013). This applies to workplace and family systems as well as food systems and forest ecology systems.

Senge points out that recognizing that such networks of connection and collaboration are what allow us to accomplish much of what we live for, reinforces our appreciation for said systems.

Senge goes on to say that, with mindfulness of the networks of which we are part, comes mindfulness of the individual nodes—or parts—that make up those networks. This awareness can help to cultivate feelings of profound respect for each node, human or non-human (Senge, 2013). Senge's theory suggests that practicing reflection in the way he describes can lead to an enriched approach to creative problem-solving and group work, while helping individuals to cultivate the same sense of interconnectedness that is explored in this research.

### **Spirituality: in relation to education and sustainability**

Several scholars have researched the current and potential roles of spirituality in education. While mindfulness practices are not necessarily spiritual, both practices can have similar outcomes. Namely, spiritual education shares the same goal of creating an intimate sense of connectedness with the world around us: a goal that has been previously identified as a central source of inspiration for engaging with sustainability challenges (Manes, 2008; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009; Zembylas & Michaelides 2008).

Villa and Thousand (2000) explore the restructuring of education for more caring and effective teaching and learning. They asked hundreds of thousands of people—parents, teachers, administrators, students, university professors, and concerned citizens—across multiple countries worldwide, the following questions: *“What do you believe should be the goals of education? What are the desired outcomes, attitudes, dispositions, and skills you want children and youth to acquire as a result of their schooling?”* (p. 123). The responses included several main categories, which the researchers identified as universal values: belonging, independence, and generosity (Villa & Thousand, 2000).

The researchers suggest practices of spirituality as a means of incorporating these values—belonging, independence and generosity—into education. They assert that “spiritual education should encourage students to go deep into themselves, into nature, and into human affairs and teach the value of service to others, to life, and to our planet” (Villa & Thousand, 2000, p. 37). This process of spiritual education could involve the same practice of intentional silence described in Mane's deep listening, and shares the goal of re-connecting students with themselves, their surroundings and the planet, while adding the notion of service.

Similarly, Hamilton and Jackson (1998) conducted a qualitative study of the conceptions of spirituality of women working as health professionals. When asked to define spirituality, one of the main themes participants' definitions centred on was “a sense of interconnectedness” (Tisdell, 2001, p. 2). Their study adds to the body of literature that explores how spirituality—similar to and sometimes involving intentional silence—can be used to increase learning, develop a commitment to social justice and provide the opportunity for meaning-making (Tisdell, 2001).

While these studies focus on spirituality as opposed to intentional silence or other mindfulness practices, their findings remain relevant due to the long history of interplay between these fields, as explored in the first section of this literature review: *Intentional Silence over Time and Culture*. Across many cultures and thousands of years, silence has been a central part of spirituality and spiritual practices (Capra, 2010). For this reason, these studies are relevant to this research of silence as a tool to develop those skills necessary to engage in the work of sustainability.

#### *Intentional silence beyond the classroom*

Another area that explores various uses of silence is outdoor recreation programming. Organizations such as British Columbia's YMCA Camp Thunderbird and

Nova Scotia's Adventure Earth Centre draw on Taoist models of leadership in their staff training, teaching staff to incorporate silence as a tool for group bonding and teamwork exercises, conflict resolution and the creation of a sense of magic and wonder in general programming and interactions with nature in particular (YMCA Camp Thunderbird, 2010). Both YMCA Camp Thunderbird and the Adventure Earth Centre train their staff in the use of silence and other mindfulness practices in order to develop more competent, sensitive and environmentally conscious leaders.

### **Silence as oppression and empowerment**

It is also important to recognize that silence can be used as an intentional form of oppression. In her research, Wildman (1988) argues that silence can be used to oppress as well as to address issues of oppression. Wildman explores the ways in which women are silenced and alienated by cultural norms that are set by men. Wildman draws on her experiences of teaching in law school at Stanford University. She calls on teachers to un-teach the cultural roles that men and women respectively fill by offering female students—those who are often silenced by norms that encourage men to dominate classroom conversation—more opportunities to answer questions in class (Wildman, 1988). By allowing for extended periods of silence when asking questions and encouraging female students in particular to answer, Wildman seeks to address the gendered power imbalance that is at play. Wildman's technique is an example of using silence to redistribute the spoken word amongst students in a more gender-equal manner. In this case, silence, when combined with the intention of creating space for women to speak, can be used as a tool to challenge the very norms that typically silence women. Wildman's technique exemplifies how, given a particular intention, silence can also be used to address oppression and work towards reversing its effects.

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## **The Gap in the literature & Creative Analytic Practice**

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This literature review has explored how different forms of mindfulness practice can be used as tools in pedagogy both to cultivate cognitive flexibility and creative thinking as well as to cultivate empathy and compassion and a personal sense of interconnectedness. Together, these bodies of literature suggest that mindfulness practices such as intentional silence can be used not only to provide people with tools useful in the work of sustainability, but also with the motivation to use these tools and to inspire others to do so as well, in lives committed to sustainability (Thom & Ma., 2005; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009; Senge et al., 2004; Senge 2013).

What this study seeks to do is to synthesize these bodies of literature and to provide insight into one group of people's experiences of mindfulness practices in pedagogy, within the context of learning how to approach issues relating to sustainability. I do this by exploring how participants of the SLC program reflect upon their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program.

### **Creative Analytic Practice**

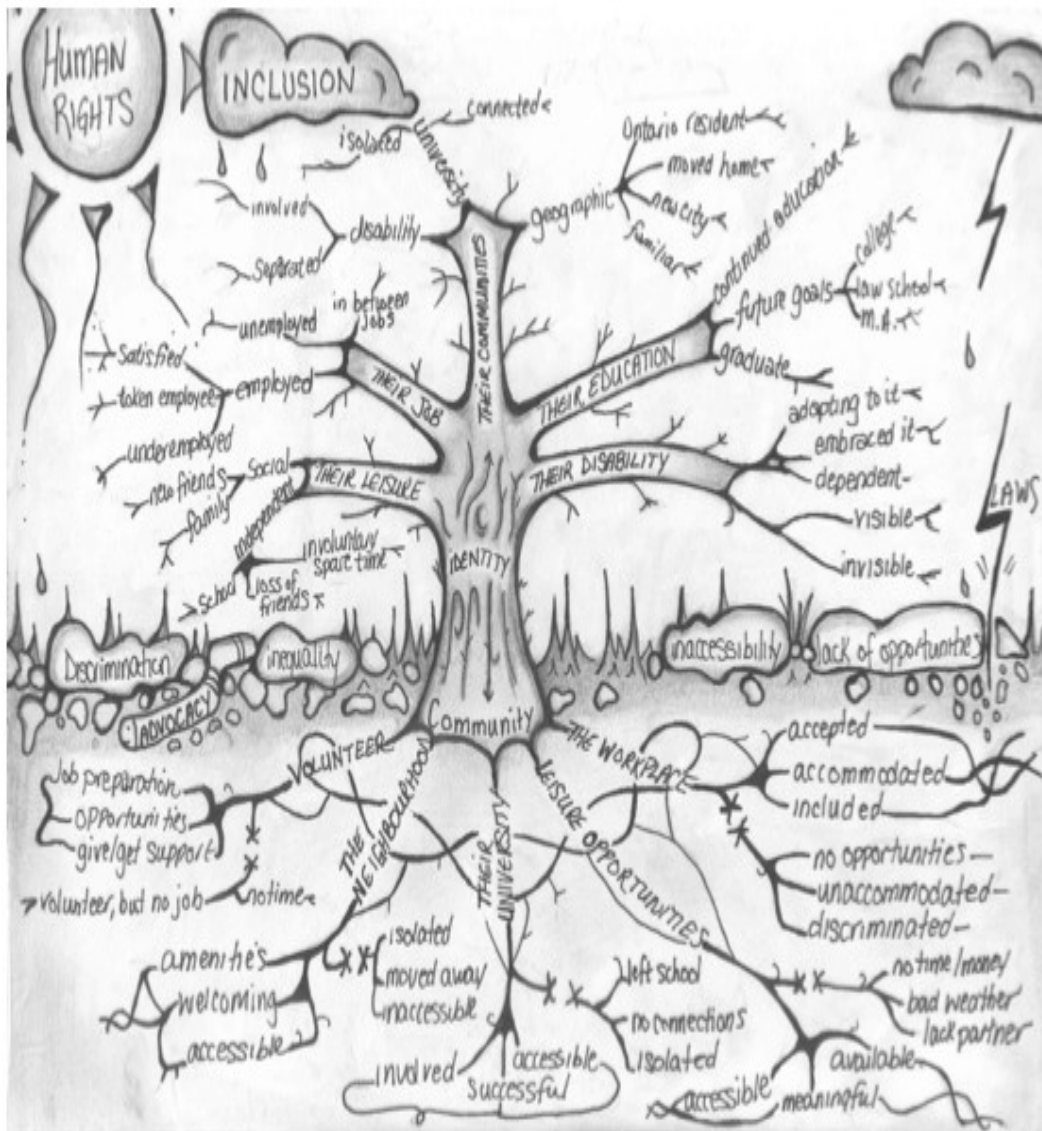
#### *A guiding methodological framework*

My analysis of the data I collected from the SLC participants, as well as the presentation of my findings has been guided by a methodological framework known as Creative Analytic Practice (CAP). Creative Analytic Practice seeks to enrich scientific writing with creative expression, allowing writers to present findings in a variety of creative manners, often inspired by the nature of the data and the purpose of the research itself. CAP also seeks to address some of the problems researchers face in their

attempts to represent other persons' lived experiences. CAP and its surrounding methodology are characterized by politics of hope and aim to critique the social world, but also to imagine how it can change for the better (Richardson, 2000, p. 254).

Examples of CAP-based research include the work of Jennifer Gillies, in which, to conclude a study of the transition from university to community for students with disabilities, Gillies presents a drawing of a tree (see Figure 2 below). The branches of this tree represent different aspects of students' identities, the leaves, thematically organized clusters of different lived experiences, and the complex root system represents the different aspects of community that support the tree (Gillies, 2007).

Figure 2. "Staying Grounded While Being Uprooted" (Gillies, 2007, p.179)



Another example of CAP is Keyes and Gearity's study of sport pedagogies: a “messy, performative text” that uses biographical and poetic narratives combined with a “theoretical-literary voice” (Keyes & Gearity, 2011, p. 511). Berbary presented a piece of CAP as ethnographic screenplay to present a study of gender roles in a Southern United-States college sorority (Berbary, 2010), and Parry presented a series of vignettes to describe experiences of dragon boat racing for people living with breast cancer (Parry, 2007).

*Addressing the issues: of traditional research and of CAP*

Scholars Parry and Johnson (2007) articulate some of the problems that CAP seeks to address in regards to researchers' attempts to represent another person's lived experiences.

To begin with, CAP addresses the creation of the “Other”, and distinction between “researcher” and what is “researched” (Parry & Johnson, 2007, p. 124-5). This refers to the effects of writing with an intention of objectivity that can detach the researcher from the research and any living subjects involved. This process of detachment, or alienation, can be reversed if the researcher intentionally dismantles the desire to write objectively and situates themselves within the research, as has become a practice in many qualitative approaches (Charmaz, 2006). A second issue that CAP addresses is the notion of asserting the unquestioned authority of academic text, which reinforces the perceived superiority of academia. Peer-reviewed, academic work is often taken to be more authoritative than non-academic expressions of lived experiences, especially within the academic community itself. The devaluing of the latter by the academic community reinforces the notion of the authoritative Ivory Tower (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

Creative analytic practice exists in part as a response to these issues. Parry and



Johnson (2007) summarize how CAP addresses the above issues by developing a framework based upon specific principles, some of which are particularly relevant to my research. One such principle encourages the researcher to acknowledge the ideological/ political agenda behind their research (Parry & Johnson, p. 124).

Due to the unconventional nature of CAP, there is specific criteria to evaluate the robustness of CAP-based research. In particular, the following criteria have been developed as tools to judge CAP pieces:

- *Does the piece contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue dealt with?*
- *How appealing and accessible is the text: does it engage people and inspire them to think?*
- *Does the text's representation of reality embody lived experiences of reality?*

These are considered strong criteria for judging CAP pieces because they reflect the values of CAP and address some of the causes of low readership of academic writing (Parry and Johnson, 2007). I address how I will incorporate these criteria into my work in the following chapter.

# Chapter Three: Methods and Methodology

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“The method of science is tried and true. It is not perfect, it's just the best we have. And to abandon it, with its skeptical protocols, is the pathway to a dark age.”

—Carl Sagan

## **Introduction to methods and methodological framework:**

This research seeks to explore the research question: *What are participants' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program?* In order to answer this question, this study involved collecting participants' responses to a qualitative questionnaire and analyzing these data by grouping the responses thematically. The process of collecting and analyzing the data was guided by a framework of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Galman, 2013). The discussion and presentation of the findings are guided by a Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) framework, as outlined by Parry and Johnson (2007), Keyes and Gearity (2011), and Gillies (2007).

## **Overview of methods**

This research was conducted in collaboration with the Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program at Dalhousie University's College of Sustainability. Over the course of the second of three weekend modules, facilitators of the SLC led program participants through two moments of silence, each roughly thirty seconds in length. On the last day of the weekend, participants received a questionnaire, asking them to share their experiences of these moments of silence. This study analyzed data obtained from

these questionnaires following a three step process of: transcribing and compiling; obtaining a general sense of; and coding the data. This process was guided by a framework of Grounded Theory, as outlined by Charmaz (2006).

### *Sample*

This study drew on a sample population of the twenty-eight participants of the SLC's second module in January, 2014. The participants were students of Dalhousie University, enrolled in a variety of programs, but all involved in the Sustainability Leadership Certificate program. The SLC program seeks to offer students the opportunity to engage in explorations of:

personal and group leadership, to empower their sense of agency to address environmental and social change [...], to gain [...] tools to take effective sustainability actions [...], to increase sustainability in all aspects of [life]; and to learn to inspire, motivate and build capacity in others to lead change. (College of Sustainability, SLC: About, 2013, para. 2. )

Participants attended three weekend modules and took part in engaged learning projects between the weekends. Throughout the program participants were encouraged to engage in various forms of reflection, intentional silence and other forms of mindfulness practices such as yoga and storytelling.

Using this sample population allowed me to take advantage of my access to a group of participants and program facilitators who were willing to engage in my research. Because my sampling is non-random, it is arguably teleological and biased, however, random sampling would have been beyond the scope, time and funding of this project. To address this, I situate my observations within the context of the SLC program, looking for particularity rather than generalizability. This focus on particularity is in keeping with standards of qualitative research methods and CAP methodology ( Neuman & Robson, 2007; Parry & Johnson, 2007).

### *Data collection procedures*

During the second module of the SLC program (January, 2014), program facilitators introduced my research to participants and led two moments of silence, each approximately thirty (30) seconds in length. On the last day of this module, I introduced myself and provided an information letter and questionnaire inviting each participant to respond to three guiding questions:

- *Please describe your experience(s) of the moments of intentional silence in this module;*
- *Within the context of an educational program such as the SLC, how did it feel to have space and time provided for silence?;*
- *Did these moments affect your overall experience of this SLC module? If so, how?*

Consent was assumed upon completion of the questionnaire, which included opt-in consent to be quoted directly, as described in the Information Letter (see Appendix A). To help ensure informed consent, I verbally outlined the key components of the Information Letter (see Appendix D). The use of a questionnaire with guiding questions was intended to allow participants to reflect in whatever (written) manner best suited them, and provided me with data that could be analyzed thematically and re-presented creatively (Creswell, 2003).

### **Thematic analysis**

The questionnaire encouraged creative, personalized responses. These responses, the data, were transcribed from the questionnaires using NeoOffice Spreadsheet to sort and explore themes. While I began the data analysis with several deductive themes of what I might expect to find informed by my literature review—such as the value of intentional silence in pedagogy—I also analyzed the data for emergent, or inductive themes in an ongoing process in keeping with Grounded Theory methodology (Galman, 2013; Charmaz, 2006). This process of inductive and deductive analysis

resulted in lists of various themes and sub-themes, patterns and outlying responses, and, as outlined in Creswell (2003), allowed for overlapping themes to inform a higher level of analysis and abstraction. In the Discussion section I draw connections between central themes from the data and the theory explored in my literature review.

### **Memo-writing**

Following an adaptation of Charmaz' model of Grounded Theory I engaged in memo-writing throughout the analysis: an ongoing process that began early in the coding process, and involved keeping track of how concepts and themes arose and evolved, as well as journaling my personal reflections throughout this process (Charmaz, 2006). Memo-writing acts as a tool for ongoing reflection and informs the Discussion section of this research.

### **Initial and axial coding**

The data was first coded using Charmaz' description of initial coding: a process of coding the data phrase by phrase to look for initial meaning, themes or points of interest. This ensures what Charmaz describes as “fit and relevance” (2006, p. 47). Codes were constructed and developed into themes and sub-themes that reflected participants' experiences.

The data was then coded using axial coding: relating themes to sub-themes; specifying the characteristics of these themes and reassembling data after initial coding to give coherence to the findings—the final themes that I articulated and decided to explore further (Charmaz, p. 60).

### *Presentation and discussion of findings*

The findings of this research are introduced and explained, then re-presented in a

creative form. This re-presentation of the findings is intentionally minimalistic in how it frames the findings, allowing them to speak for themselves and encouraging the reader to shape their own analysis. The use of CAP's methodological framework complements my research focus—of how people experience moments of intentional silence—by combining conventional approaches to qualitative analysis with an alternative, creative approach. The particular form of creative presentation chosen—haiku—was decided based on the nature and context of the data: just as participants' reflections speak to experiences of silence, the haiku form of writing is inherently minimalistic, creating space and silence around the subject (Haiku Society of America, 2004). Thus, the method is designed to fit the content, and the data itself guides the end result. This fits with the intention of fairly re-presenting the lived experiences represented by the data, in keeping with CAP methodology (Parry & Johnson, 2007).

### **Dependability, particularity and validity**

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency of data and methods used (Neuman & Robson, 2007). To ensure this, Honours Supervisor Dr. Karen Gallant reviewed the data and conducted an independent thematic analysis. The findings presented are the resulting integration of this independent analysis into my own analysis. This study acknowledges the particularity of participants' experiences by drawing on direct quotations in the findings.

It is important to recognize that I have relationships outside of this research with several of the participants of this study, and that this might have affected participants' willingness to participate in my research. I addressed this by ensuring the anonymity of participants as well as by leaving the room once the questionnaires were distributed and only returning once they had been completed. Furthermore, I included any “negative information” to ensure the academic validity of this work (Creswell, 2003).

## **Role of researcher**

Both my privilege and my personal experiences have shaped my perspective as I have engaged in this research. An awareness of this has been important in establishing a sensitive approach to this research (Waite, 1998; Creswell, 2003). For this reason, it is important that I identify myself within this research and I do so in the three ways that I perceive to be most relevant. Firstly, I identify as an active beneficiary of unsustainable and unjust systems of global trade, natural resource exploitation and neo-colonial politics. These systems have given me the material wealth, the social status and the education that I have today. Secondly, I acknowledge my own story as a British-Canadian settler on largely unceded Mi'kmaq territory, part of which is occupied by the colonial institution of Dalhousie University. As a student of sustainability and issues pertaining to environmental and social justice, I must be critically aware of how this research work can be an opportunity for me to confront these realities and recognize the political statement I am making by participating as a student at Dalhousie University. Thirdly, I recognize the privilege I carry into this research as “an academic” and with it the responsibility I feel to create a final piece that is accessible to non-academic readership (or in simpler terms, a final piece that is readable!).

It is also important here to state my personal interest in and explorations of intentional silence, for they shape my perspective on this topic and my motivations to study it (Creswell, 2003). I have practiced silent meditation for roughly eight years and I deeply value the clarity it has brought to my life. Finally, for the last four years I have been a student at the College of Sustainability, and a former participant of the SLC program. This means that I have a personal connection to many of those people involved with the SLC program as well as an emotional attachment to and sense of value for the program itself. I see myself as a peer of those who are informing my

research, and am honoured to have this opportunity to share in their reflections of experiencing silence in the SLC.



# Chapter Four: Findings

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*“Silence is a funny thing. Sometimes it makes me feel uneasy.”*

-SLC participant, January, 2014

## **Introduction to the findings**

This chapter begins with a description of the findings, including: the people who participated in the study; the process of analyzing the data; and the themes emerging from this data. As an exploratory response to my research question—*What are participants’ reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program?*—I introduce the themes as “nested experiences” to describe the overlapping ways in which participants experienced silence. This chapter ends with a re-presentation of the findings in Haiku form, introduced as a form of Creative Analytic Practice (CAP). In the following Discussion chapter, I expand upon the notion of nested experiences of silence to explore a parallel with nested experiences of Sustainability challenges, and how these intersect at the point of individual experiences and practice.

## **Description of the sample**

The findings of this research are drawn from the reflections of 27 students, all participants of the Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program. They responded to a qualitative questionnaire asking them to reflect on their experiences of silence within the SLC program. These students came from a variety of faculties but shared the common experience of participating in the SLC program. These students had already spent a previous, three-day SLC module together and thus had some level of familiarity

with one another, and many were also students at Dalhousie University' College of Sustainability.

### **General description of the data**

The data represent participants' reflections of how they experienced moments of intentional silence. Participants tended to comment not only on their experiences of silence within the SLC, but also to share some of their more general ideas regarding silence, voicing their perceptions of silence in other contexts as well. While this was unsolicited, it was a common phenomenon for many participants.

### **The many ways of experiencing silence**

Participants' reflections—the data—suggest that the majority of participants appreciated opportunities for silence in the SLC. However there were several individuals who revealed that they found the silence to be uncomfortable, boring or a “waste of time”. Others spoke of experiencing feelings of comfort, rest, relaxation, feeling centred or grounded, as well as using the moments of silence to mentally prepare, absorb concepts or to “just be”. Some noted that the moments of silence felt forced or unnecessary, others, well-fitted to the program and useful. Some students spoke to realizations about their needs for more time in silence, solitude or rest, or their perceptions of what silence “should” or “shouldn't” be. Some participants' reflections suggested that they perceived a particular purpose for the moments of silence.

### **Central Findings: three contextual layers to experiencing silence**

Guided by an adapted Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), I sorted through these various themes and sub-themes, revisiting them and my memo-writing until I drew out three central themes that seemed to best represent the data. These

themes describe the different contexts within which participants reflected upon their experiences of intentional silence. These three contexts are: the individual's personal context; the context of one's immediate surroundings and; context beyond the immediate experience of the SLC program.

*"I felt safe."*

**The first layer of context** reflects participants' *immediate personal* context. This includes reflections on emotional, physical and social (dis)comfort, sense of self, wellness, rest, joy or irritation. One participant reflected: "I [...] really feel the importance of just being quiet with my own thoughts", describing personal appreciation for engaging in silence. Another participant reflected: "I felt uncomfortable up to half way [at which point] I accepted the silence", describing initial discomfort and interestingly, the change that followed.

One participant expressed finding "a new sense of meaning" and others, a greater desire for understanding in silence. Participants noted an increased ability to learn and to absorb material, as well as a sense of building trust within the SLC community. One participant wrote a string of words, followed by a symbol to express their feelings: "peace, present, grounded, hopeful, ambitious :)".

*"[I] wish there were moments of silence in all my classes."*

**The second layer of context** can be described as including one's immediate surroundings. This includes reflections of physical and social surroundings as well as the context of learning, of one's ability to absorb, process and present concepts and ideas. One participant reflected that, "silence makes you understand or try to understand why each activity and exercise is important", thus speaking to how experiences of silence influenced how they interacted with the activities of the SLC

program and the context around them. Another participant reflected: “[...]the silence made me more appreciative of what I was learning and of my surroundings.”. Within this second layer of context, participants often described their immediate surroundings: the room, the program itself and the timing of the moments of silence. One person reflected: “with the silences i felt i had a very well rounded experience [of the SLC]”.

*“[Silence] makes you appreciate, everything more. Little and big.”*

**The third layer of context** pertains to that which is beyond the immediate experience of silence and the SLC. Here, participants reflected on their personal perceptions, values and philosophies, sometimes related to silence, sometimes not, as well as their own narratives of the role of silence in their lives and the world at large. This layer includes critical examinations of fast-paced, modern-day culture and reflections on notions of simplicity in the face of complexity, as well as the notion of silence as a practice. One participant reflected that “silence simplifies things. One of the hardest things in life is to simplify it, it's so easy to make it complex.” This reflection addresses the issue of complexity: a central challenge in the study of sustainability. Another participant reflected that: “people, especially in our fast-paced world, never give their time to reflect”. This third layer of context includes notions of silence in the world at large, beyond both the individual participant and the program itself.

These different layers of experience, as well as the themes and sub-themes that comprise them are the central findings of this research. Following CAP methodology, these findings are re-presented in the following section, in haiku: a form of poetic verse that allows for the reader to draw their own conclusions. Composed exclusively of quotations from participants' reflections, the following haiku offer an alternative presentation of the findings. The haiku are not placed under any grouping, but rather, stand alone. This is intended to emphasize the way in which each reflection, and its

related sub-theme, could be connected to different nested experiences of silence, as well as to signify the importance of each one, and thus the importance of each experience.

## **Haiku**

The haiku structure was chosen precisely because haiku, while being intentionally minimalistic, are often understood to stand on their own, needing no other context to be taken as a piece of poetic expression; the meaning is left unexplained, for the reader to discern. Haiku are a form of poetic verse that traditionally follows a structure of three lines of up to 17 syllables consisting of 5-7-5: 5 in the first line, 7 in the second, and 5 in the third. Haiku writing has taken various other forms however, especially in modern, English writing. While the following haiku do not all follow the traditional syllable count or three-line structure, they are in keeping with the tradition of using minimalist, imagistic language to convey the essence of an experience, often intimately related to nature and the human condition (Haiku Society of America, n.d., 2004).

Each of the following haiku are composed of nothing other than one participant's own words. CAP author Jennifer Gillies cites various uses within creative analytic practice of poetry created using exact words and phrases from participant transcripts to articulate their experiences in "a succinct and poignant way" (Gillies, 2007, p. 176). My use of the participants' own words to create haiku is intended to represent their experiences in a minimalist fashion. This minimalism is meant as an intentional creation of space and conceptual silence.

# Experiences of Silence

*How ready you are  
to challenge yourself,  
out of your comfort zone*

*Silence giving meaning  
to what is  
being learnt.*

*Understand.  
Or try to understand.  
Each is important.*

*Fast-paced world,  
give time to reflect,  
appreciate everything more.*

*Boring/useless, wasting  
my time!  
My own time.*

*Yes. I often think of little.  
I.e. The colour of the marker leads.  
Or nothing at all...*

*I often have silence;  
require those moments.  
Cultivate trust, at certain times of  
silence. Yes!*

*I complete the session.  
Still very nervous.  
Take a breath, let body catch up to mind.*

*Its so easy to make it complex...*

*Simplify things.*

*One of the hardest things.*

*Silence creates a space—*

*I enter in to find it,*

*for reflection and thinking*

*Silent reflection,*

*introspective,*

*as it is happening.*

*Feeling discomfort,*

*Until...*

*I accept the silence.*

*Constantly engaging in discussion,*

*Come back to a calm place,*

*let me feel ready to learn and engage.*

*Grapple with social anxiety,*

*to get away, I always find silence*

*to be incredibly centering...*

*Some silences are awkward,*

*but being told,*

*“this is a moment of silence”,*

*takes all the pressure away.*

In the following Discussion chapter, I expand upon the notion of nested experiences of silence to explore similarly nested experiences of sustainability challenges, and how these intersect at the point of the individual's experience.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

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“Mindfulness isn't difficult, we just need to remember to do it.”

—Sharon Salzberg, *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*

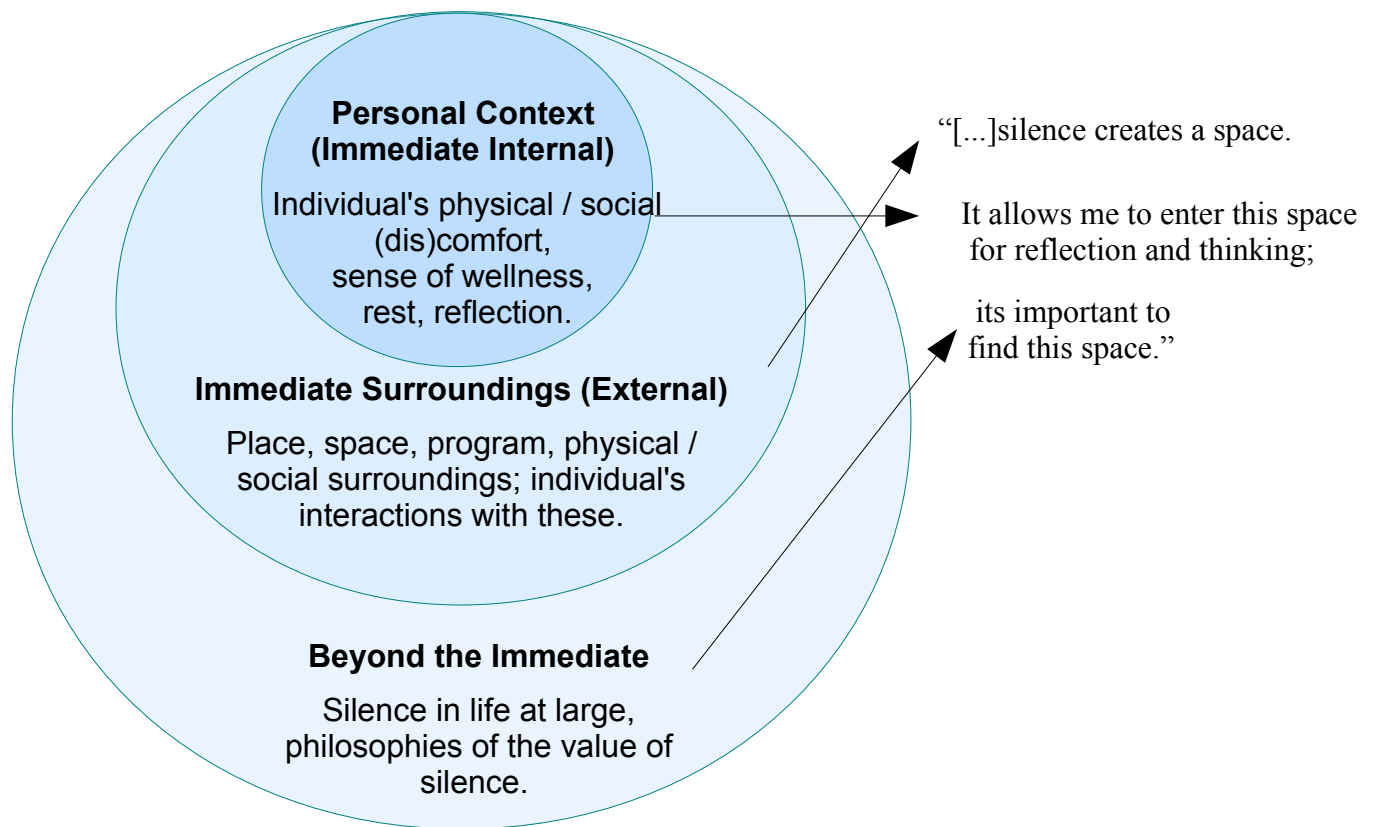
The following chapter begins with a discussion of the central research findings: the three layers of context in which people experienced silence in the SLC, and how these layers overlap, or are *nested* within one another. This leads into a discussions of the intersection of people's experiences of intentional silence and of sustainability challenges, and how a mindful practice of engaged, or enacted, sustainability can bridge the gap between theory and action. I discuss the responsibility we have of making this step in order to support those individuals who are presently engaged in the work of sustainability.

## **Nested experiences of silence**

One way of understanding participants' reflections of the moments of silence they experienced is to contextualize them within the individual's personal, collective and/or global context. These three layers of context—one's personal context, immediate surroundings and that which is beyond one's immediate self and surroundings—can be understood as *nested experiences of silence*, to reflect the way in which they overlap and interact, as well as how they draw from the same point of intersection and origin: the individual's experience. The following image demonstrates how these three layers of experience relate to one another; the quote alongside demonstrates how one individual's reflection can address all three of these layers of experience simultaneously.



## Nested Experiences of Silence



The circles in this image are not concentric, like the circles that form around a rock thrown into still water. Rather, they all intersect at one specific point. This point of intersection (at the top of the three circles), represents the *individual's experience* of silence itself, which, though it is initially a personal experience, can almost instantly connect with the other layers of context, as one's individual experience begins to affect (one's perception of) one's surroundings and the world / life at large.

I consider these three layers of context to be nested because of the way in which they exist within one another. For example, take the following reflection, broken down into three phrases: “[Phrase 1] silence creates a space / [Phrase 2] It allows me to enter this space for reflection and thinking / [Phrase 3] its important to find this space”. The first phrase speaks to one's personal sense of space. The second phrase introduces the subject, the participant, and their use of the space created for reflection and thinking. In

the third phrase the participant states a belief that finding this space is important, alluding to their own philosophy of silence. In this way, this reflection speaks at once to the individual's personal experience, experience within the space and of concepts beyond themselves and their surroundings.

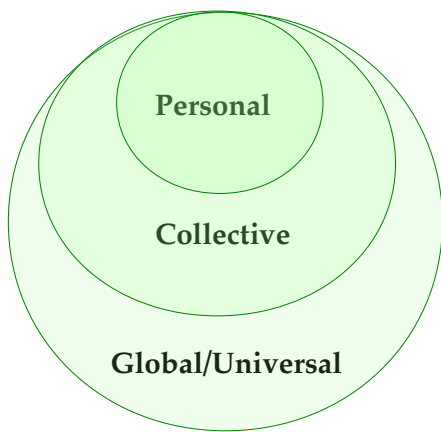
This concept of nested experiences helps to illustrate how multiple layers of context, or lived experience can co-exist simultaneously, intimately embedded within one another. It also demonstrates how one's personal experience is affected by one's surroundings and one's world-view, and vice versa.

### **Where Things Intersect**

#### *Silence and Sustainability: the Intersection of Practices*

Expanding on the notion of nested layers of context, parallels can be drawn between individuals' experiences of silence and individuals' experiences of engaging with sustainability challenges. Comparing the findings of this research with the literature reviewed, there is a suggestion that in the context of both phenomena—silence and sustainability challenges—these intersecting layers of experience exist: the individual's experience within a personal context, the context of their social, cultural and physical (ecological) surroundings, and finally the way in which they connect to and experience it on a global/universal level. The image below demonstrates how these layers reflect those of experiences of silence, radiating out from the same initial point of the personal context. Each layer is associated (below) with examples of how one might relate to a given sustainability challenge at each level of context.

## Experiences of Sustainability Challenges/Issues



Sense of (un)wellness: physical; social; emotional; spiritual

Relation of one's surroundings to issue: personal social life, nation-state, culture, class, profession, race.

Political, Economic, Social, Spiritual relation to issue.

*Individual* experiences of sustainability challenges could include one's experience of a proposed housing development on green spaces near one's home: something that might affect one's own physical or mental health. A *collective* experience might be one's experience of environmental and social destruction, caused for example by Canada's oil extraction industry: an issue that may affect one's social surroundings, be discussed in the narrative of one's culture, class or profession, or on the regional news. Such an issue might be perceived as more significant, but also more abstract and perhaps less of a direct threat to one's own wellness. Finally, a *global or universal* experience of a sustainability challenge might include one's experience of climate change. One might relate to such an issue on a political, economic, philosophical or spiritual level. The issue may be immense in scale but also very abstract, with no immediate affect on one's day to day life, but with a significant influence on one's emotions or outlook on life.

### **Personal Practice: where reflection and sustainability action intersect**

These three layers overlap at the point of individual, or personal experience: that which is rooted in the personal, but affects how one relates with one's immediate surroundings, greater social context and global/universal sense of self. Kaza (2008) outlines how to begin with personal experiences of sustainability challenges and draw on a sense of interconnectedness to develop a personal practice of ecological

mindfulness and action, beginning in the personal sphere and expanding to one's relations with one's immediate surroundings and the world / universe (Kaza). Kaza outlines the key component of engaging on this path: the development of a personal practice of ecological mindfulness, through which the personal becomes the collective and the global, and the global and collective become intimately personal. The key to such a practice is reflection, silence and an intention to commit to the sustainability challenge at hand (Kaza, 2008).

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### **Addressing the problem, committing to sustainability**

“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but [one] must take it because conscience tells [one] it is right.”

—Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*

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The challenge that eventually led to this study's research question was to explore ways to address the conceptual, technical and intellectual challenges inherent in sustainability challenges, as well as the personal challenges of committing to the work of sustainability (Brown et al., 2010; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Midgely, 1995). To commit to the outer and inner work of sustainability, personal practice may be necessary in order to cultivate discipline, maintain motivation and provide critical mindfulness and awareness of one's self, one's surroundings and one's connection with the world / universe.

As discussed in the literature review, mindfulness practices can help to improve one's intellectual abilities as well as one's sense of interconnectedness with one's surroundings. The findings of this study suggest that individuals actively learning to be leaders in sustainability actions found intentional silence to be a useful aid in their experiences, providing many participants with a sense of groundedness, clarity or calm. The combination of these findings, from the literature and from the research itself, suggests that individuals engaged with sustainability challenges can benefit from a personal practice of mindfulness, such as intentional silence. Such practices can help individuals understand how they relate to an issue on a personal, collective and global level, thus providing motivation as well as a sense of groundedness, if larger issues or challenges become overwhelming. With a personal practice that seeks to understand the interconnectedness of the personal, collective and universal, an individual engaged in sustainability can connect with their community more meaningfully. It can also help individuals connect with global issues on an intimate, personal level.

### **Mindfulness Practice: the bridge between theory and action**

This research set out to explore the question: *What are participants' reflections of their experiences of intentional silence within the SLC program?* Underlying this question is the question of what it takes to inspire people to commit to addressing today's realities of unsustainable human practices,<sup>1</sup> or in other words, to act.

While the academic community is good at theorizing, we are not as effective at taking action. The sustainability movement is young and during the last 60 years has developed a discourse around sustainability and identified common principles. Now it is time for action; to address on a personal, collective and global scale the sustainability

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1. Such practices could be defined by capitalism, neo-colonialism, or a cultural hegemony that is inherently sexist, racist and patriarchal, and that relies on violence to self-sustain and results in environmental destruction and the institutionalization and normalization of social injustices.

challenges we are facing: environmental, social and political.

Through this study I have sought to explore intentional silence as a form of mindfulness practice that might enhance the reflections and ensuing awareness of individuals such as the participants of the SLC: individuals who are already engaging intellectually and personally with sustainability. This study was inspired by the idea that mindfulness practice might increase such individuals' awareness of the reality of the issues they are studying as well as their own potential to engage with these challenges personally, outside of the classroom. In other words, the idea that mindfulness practice might be used as a bridge between learning and action. By addressing two bodies of literature that focused, respectively, on the intellectual/ cognitive skills and the personal development associated with mindfulness practice, this study has sought to explore a way to equip and inspire people to commit to a path of engaged sustainability, or an *enacted* path of sustainability, guided and grounded by mindfulness practice and acted out on a personal, collective and global scale.

The findings of this study suggest three different levels of context in which participants experienced silence that match these three scales of engagement: personal, collective and global. The previous discussion explores how these contexts parallel those of experiencing issues of sustainability. Interestingly, many reflections drew connections between all three of these layers of context, in a manner that suggested the participant's sense of the interconnectedness of personal, collective and global. This reflects the concept presented in the literature that mindfulness practices can be a tool for cultivating a sense of interconnectedness (Senge et al. 2004; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). Cultivating this sense of interconnectedness can, in turn, lead to the development of a strong sense of responsibility to one's surroundings and thus a desire to protect them (Manes, 1992). The process of cultivating such awareness and responsibility, however, requires an ongoing practice: a practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a practice, rather than a state of being, because the mind is constantly changing, reacting to new stimulus and must be brought back to mindfulness in every moment, in times of conflict as well as peace. One must strive to cultivate mindfulness actively: this is the practice.

Significantly, to practice means to go beyond the theoretical/academic and to personally engage, in this context, by bringing mindful sustainability into one's life and thus into one's work or service, one's external life, as well. Mindfulness practice can strengthen one's sense of the interconnectedness of things, helping to cultivate a sense of intimacy between the global and the personal, thus providing motivation to act. Such a practice, like a camera lens, can be focused on different concepts, challenges and realities, resulting in different forms of mindfulness, such as ecological, political or spiritual mindfulness, until with more practice, the boundaries between these categories disintegrate all together.

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## A note on writing this thesis

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In writing this thesis I have tried to engage in mindfulness and a practice of intentional silence to guide my process of researching, analyzing, presenting and discussing the findings. I have followed a loose practice of sitting in silence and breathing mindfully before writing. In this way, my memo-writing—often conducted in silence—became a form of silent reflection. When it came time to read participants' reflections, I did so with the concept of active listening in mind. In sum the process of conducting this research has been an attempt to combine the theory explored in the literature with my own personal practice. As a result I have enjoyed more clear-minded working, a deep sense of gratefulness for the participant's reflections as I read them, and often a sense of calm and purpose while working.

While I have enjoyed how these simple practices have enriched my experiences writing this thesis, I am aware that they are only a first step. While I have been writing this thesis pertaining to the need to address issues of sustainability with engaged, personal commitment and a life of service/ action that reflects that, the Harper government has passed omnibus bills that have disassembled environmental regulation and cleared the way for extreme (oil) extractive industries, while cutting funding to social spending aggressively and pushing a strong neo-liberal agenda that threatens the well-being of the people, water, earth, air and animals of this land (David Suzuki Foundation, 2012). I am aware that as an informed, educated, privileged Canadian citizen, it is my responsibility to engage in opposition to this agenda, its effects and its roots, and to do so in a way that is wholly sustainable, mindful and thus, effective.



# Recommendations: the Call to Action

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Making this bridge between *theorizing about* and *enacting* sustainability is crucial. While there are social-environmental injustices happening globally, one need not look beyond the borders of the Canadian nation-state for issues that need mindfully committed action. Outside of the academic Ivory Tower, there are countless groups of people defending their, and our, rights and responsibilities to nature: to water, to the land, to ecosystems and to the wellbeing of humans. Many of these people(s) face challenges: violent push-back from big energy corporations and the Canadian nation-state, underfunding, institutionalized racism and more. Often these front-line communities who are suffering the effects of environmental destruction are the least privileged, most under-resourced and socially marginalized, yet they are those who are fighting hardest to protect the rights and resources we all rely on (Anaya, 2013; Scoffield, 2013). These communities of people need help and the call to action has been sounded.

## *A note to the College of Sustainability Community*

The challenges these communities are addressing are sustainability challenges. They are the intersections of environmental, social, political and economic power struggles. They are complex and overwhelming. They will decide what this planet looks like ten years, one hundred years, seven generations from today.

As students, staff or faculty, we are members of a sustainability community, and it is our responsibility to turn our thinking, our theorizing, into action. Beyond being part of this community, simply as beneficiaries of many of the most unsustainable and

unjust human practices, we have a responsibility to engage, not just intellectually, but personally, with action and commitment. One tool to doing this successfully—that is, meaningfully and in a way that one can sustain—is to have a practice that seeks to intimately unite the personal, the collective and the global, as well as to keep oneself grounded, especially in times of distress. This tool is a practice of mindfulness that guides a path of enacted sustainability.

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# Appendices:

**Appendix A – Information Letter**

**Appendix B – Recruitment Script**

**Appendix C - Questionnaire**

**Appendix D – Questionnaire Information Script**

**Appendix E – Facilitators' Guiding Silence Script**

**Appendix F – Tree of Contemplative Practices**

## **Appendix A: Information Letter (formatted for printing purposes)**

### **Title: "Exploring Silence in the SLC"**

Researcher: Benjamin Reid-Howells, Honours Student, College of Sustainability

Email: bn292340@dal.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Karen Gallant, Assistant Professor, Health and Human Performance

Email: karen.gallant@dal.ca

I invite you to take part in a research study that I, Benjamin Reid-Howells, am conducting as a student at Dalhousie University, as part of my Honours project with the College of Sustainability. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary and you can choose to return the questionnaire entirely blank. There will be no impact on your participation in the SLC program if you decide not to participate in the research. The information below tells you about what you will be asked to do and about any benefit, risk, or discomfort that you might experience. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with myself, Ben Reid-Howells, or my supervisor, Dr. Karen Gallant.

### **Who Is Conducting the Research Study**

I, Benjamin Reid-Howells, am the Principal Investigator and Dr. Karen Gallant is the Supervisor. Aside from the participants themselves, these are the only individuals who will be involved in the research.

### **Purpose and Outline of the Research Study**

This research looks at people's experiences of intentional, or guided silence within a context of institutional education, specifically, the Sustainability Leadership Certificate (SLC) program at Dalhousie University's College of Sustainability. The intent of this research is to explore how students of the SLC experience moments of silence in the context of the program's second Module: Tools for Change.



### **Who Can Participate in the Research Study**

You are invited to participate in this study if you are involved with the SLC as a student or facilitator. You need only have attended the moments of silence in this year (2013-2014)'s second Module of the SLC program.

### **What You Will Be Asked to Do**

To help me in my exploration of people's experiences of moments of guided silence, I will ask you to provide feedback in regards to your experiences this weekend in a questionnaire that you will receive upon completion of this second SLC Module. Completing this questionnaire will take approximately ten (10) minutes. It will take place in the same location as the SLC program.

### **Possible Benefits, Risks, Discomforts and Compensation**

It is my hope that responding to this questionnaire will be a satisfying experience for you and will benefit your own reflective process as well as my research.

The risks associated with this study are minimal, and include potential emotional upset as a reaction to reflecting on a sensitive topic, and boredom. Again, you can choose not to respond to certain or to any questions.

You will receive no compensation for your time other than my profound and genuine appreciation for the contribution of your story to my research.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

Because the questionnaires will be completed anonymously, *you will not be identified in any way in my report*. I and my supervisor are trained and have obligations to keep all research information private. Upon completion of this research, the final report will be made publicly available. Until then, only my supervisor and myself will have access to any of the information you provide.

### **If You Decide to Stop Participating**

You are free to stop participating at any time. You may simply stop responding to the questionnaire, hand in a blank sheet of paper and dispose of anything you have written as you see fit. In no way shall this affect your participation in the SLC. Because all of the information you will provide will be anonymous, it will be impossible for me to remove it from my report because it will in no way be associated with you.

### **How to Obtain Results**

Upon completion of my research, I will make my report accessible to the public. It will be available to all Dalhousie students at [dalspace.ca](http://dalspace.ca) and in addition I will provide a copy to the organizers of the SLC and request that it be forwarded electronically to all SLC participants.

### **Questions**

I am happy to talk with you about any questions or concerns you may have about your participation in this research study. You are free to ask me questions in person when the questionnaire is distributed. For any additional questions, please contact me, Benjamin Reid-Howells (at [bn292340@dal.ca](mailto:bn292340@dal.ca)) or Dr. Karen Gallant (at 902 494-1196, [karen.gallant@dal.ca](mailto:karen.gallant@dal.ca)), at any time.

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation in this research, you may also contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email: [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca).

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Script**

Ben is a fourth year student at the College of Sustainability writing his thesis on peoples' experiences of silence within the context of group learning in institutional education. More specifically, he is researching people's experiences of moments of silence that are guided, or in other words, intentional. This weekend we will explore this by taking a few moments to stop and be silent, to reflect. Feel free to explore these moments in any way that seems best to you, so long as it does not disturb the silence of others. At the end of the module, you will receive a questionnaire asking you to write a little bit about your experience of these moments.

## **Appendix C: Questionnaire**

**Exploring Silence in the SLC : An exploration of people's experiences of intentional silence within the Sustainability Leadership Certificate program.**

This questionnaire is being conducted as part of an honours thesis at Dalhousie University in the Department of Environment, Society and Sustainability (ESS). I am investigating people's \_\_\_\_\_. Please refer to the information letter provided for more information on the study. **Please note that completion and submission of this questionnaire implies your consent to participate in this study.** You are free to hand in a blank questionnaire if you do not wish to participate.

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any publication that comes from this research.

Yes:                      No:

### **Instructions:**

Please reflect on your experience(s) of this weekend's moment(s) of intentional silence.

Please feel free to respond to these guiding questions in any written form: prose, poetry, free-form, etc.

- 1. Please describe your experience(s) of the moments of intentional silence in this module;*
- 2. Within the context of an educational program such as the SLC, how did it feel to have space and time provided for silence?;*
- 3. Did these moments affect your overall experience of this SLC module? If so, how?*

## **Appendix D: Questionnaire Introduction Script**

My name is Ben Reid-Howells. I am a fourth year student doing my ESS honours thesis. Over the course of this module, you've experienced moments of silence. I am interested in your experiences of these moments. As part of my research on people's experiences of such moments of intentional silence, I have a questionnaire that I'm hoping you will complete once it is handed out. There is an Information Letter that explains much of what I am telling you now. Keep that for your own records. The questionnaire has open ended questions that ask you to reflect on your experience of this weekends moments of silence.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You will remain entirely anonymous. Facilitators will not know whether or not you have participated. Everyone will receive a form. If you do not wish to participate, feel free to do nothing with it, but please take a form and return it, so as to ensure the anonymity of others.

You can expect to spend 10 minutes or so completing this questionnaire. By completing this questionnaire you are informing my research with one more personal experience, one more story.

Thank you so much for your time.

## **Appendix E: Facilitators Guiding Silence Script**

For the next minute or so we're going to invite everyone to sit in silence. Feel free to engage in this silence in whichever way feels best to you.

## Appendix F: Tree of Contemplative Practices

Zajonc's "Tree of Contemplative Practices" further reflects activities within the SLC. Many of the forms of contemplative, or mindfulness practices depicted on this tree are examples of activities incorporated into the programming of the SLC. For example, the method of Appreciative Inquiry taught in the SLC is an example of "Contemplative Inquiry" as depicted on the tree, while Yoga and Storytelling are examples of "Contemplative Movement" and "Relational Contemplative Practice", respectively (Duen & Bergman, 2014). Zajonc's research asserts that mindfulness practices are not only effective learning tools, but specifically so in the context of enriching a creative process to approach seemingly impossible complexity.

