

The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace, by Barry M. Kroll. Logan: Utah State UP, 2013. 176 pp.

Reviewed by Rachel Griffio, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

While “mindfulness” has been a buzzword across disciplines and beyond, in *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace*, Barry Kroll grounds some of the tenets of mindful practice, which include active listening, favoring the present moment, and exercising nonjudgmental behavior, in a cross-cultural, embodied, and kinesthetic approach to Rogerian argumentation. Based on a course he taught over a period of six semesters, entitled “Arguing as an Art of Peace,” Kroll’s book includes student writing on, and in response to, deliberative, conciliatory, and integrative approaches to argument. Using the image of an open hand, as opposed to a closed fist, Kroll juxtaposes these approaches alongside Chinese cosmologies, yin and yang. Returning to these terms of difference throughout the book, Kroll reveals the way that a mindful approach to argumentation requires an awareness of the interplay between resistance and reception where moments of balance may occur.

The intention behind Kroll’s book is understood through the concepts he uses as the basis of his students’ projects and in the way he structures the book itself. Each of the five sections of *The Open Hand* may be read as five individual chapters, or, as a practice not unlike aikido or judo. For instance, the opening chapter, “Clapping In,” does what it says and says what it does: it calls the reader to attention. Reminiscent of Japanese martial arts, Kroll explains that he and his students began their class sessions with three claps. Being mindful of practicality and readability, Kroll enacts a mindful approach to the transmission of the book’s intentions by keeping “focus on projects and activities” students completed in the course and avoiding “strings of in-text references and citations . . . using notes for most references” (8). What results is an accessible and practical example of a mindful approach to argumentative writing pedagogy.

The second chapter, “Reframing and Deliberative Argument,” includes kinesthetic examples of activities that further explicate the interdependent nature of yin and yang transitions in argument. To facilitate an embodied understanding of the implications for yin and yang in deliberation and redirection, students participate in a version of push hands based on tai chi and an aikido movement called *irimi* (entering). Some important questions that guide this section of learning include: “When does redirection feel soft and when does it become aggressive? When, that is, does a redirective push become an adversarial shove?” (51). These questions direct students toward the kind of thinking that LuMing Mao encourages in “Returning to Yin and Yang: From

Terms of Opposites to Interdependence-in-Difference.” These kinesthetic exercises ask students to examine and be aware of the subtle transitions within and between assertive, redirective, and receptive approaches to push and pull activities and to reflect on the ways they may relate to verbal argumentation.

Chapter three, “Attentive Listening and Conciliatory Argument,” describes the second unit of Kroll’s seminar, “Arguing as an Art of Peace.” Having developed and become aware of mindful approaches to argumentation, this next unit asks students to consider “[h]ow is it possible to use arguing as an art of peace when a clash of views appears to be inevitable?” (61). To support connections between kinesthetic activities and argumentation, Kroll assigned his students sections of George Thomson and Jerry Jenkins’ *Verbal Judo*. While karate is based on an offensive system of movements, judo, by contrast, is all about redirection and non-hurtful approaches to conflict. When used as a verbal approach to argumentation, the precepts of judo provide an opening for a conciliatory argument about a controversial issue in a way that practices reciprocity.

Circumventing the traditional “taking sides” approach, in chapter four’s “Mediating and Integrative Argument,” Kroll pairs editorials that implement mediation strategies with a Zen Buddhist koan, “Nansen Cuts a Cat.” In this koan from the sacred text *The Gateless Gate*, monks on east and west ends of a hall argue over a cat. Lost in their words, neither side is able to find a middle ground, so Nansen cuts the cat in half. Revealing the problem with binary logic, students commented that Nansen was a mediating figure who was trying to create a space for the monks to distance themselves from their own words and focus on shared viewpoints. Striving for a similar approach to argumentation, students chose topics on controversial issues and “talked about points of agreement or shared concern as a basis for mediating differences of view” (100), which created a space for them to enact yin and yang logic in their papers.

Finally, in chapter five’s “Bowing Out” Kroll closes an analogical loop. Like the *enso*—a circle painted in one single breath—that appears in chapter three and on the cover of the book, Kroll’s subtitle, *Arguing as an Art of Peace*, comes full circle. Returning to some of the contemplative practices that students enacted throughout the seminars, Kroll is explicit about the gaps between mindful practice and argument. While painting an *enso*, slowly eating raisins, and sitting in a Japanese garden were meaningful for students in the seminar, some of them were skeptical about what direct connections there were between these practices and argumentation. In response, Kroll explains that “mindfulness is not a *model* for arguing differently but a *practice* that supports arguing with an open hand” (116, emphasis in original). In other words, the relationship between mindfulness and argument is best understood by looking at where our contemplative life and our material life meet. For instance,

one would not sit around in a Japanese garden all day or spend all of his or her time painting *enso*. That kind of thinking and acting would be extreme. Drawing instead on yin and yang logic, it is possible to understand the way that these practices simply create a foundation, making argument as an art of peace more accessible.

As a practitioner of contemplative practice, I have been attracted to composition scholarship by Mary Rose O'Reilley, Gesa Kirsch, Claude Hurlbert, LuMing Mao, and Kurt Spellmeyer—among others—who value, to use O'Reilley's words, the way “contending elements of the self . . . nudge us toward living a more integrated life” (33). I would certainly add Kroll's book to this important list of contemplative scholarship. The challenge with applying contemplative practices and concepts to the teaching of rhetoric or argument is often explaining how and why they translate into useful rhetorical strategies. In this regard, what some readers might like to see more of in this book is an even greater level of transparency that would reveal how difficult it is to teach and practice argument as an art of peace, when arguing to win or to get a good grade are, at times, more desirable options. There is a lot to be learned from the kind of teaching moments described in chapter four when Kroll shares students' concerns about the relationship between mindful practice and argument. Without these moments of honest reflection on the role of contemplative practices in rhetorical strategies, the benefit of such practices might be lost. Having said that, one of the strongest aspects of Kroll's project is his inclusion of kinesthetic learning set beside written models of similar (rhetorical) moves. To make the kinesthetic examples he discusses palpable, he includes photographs of students enacting the practices he discusses in the index to the book. After reading, I am encouraged, and I think other compositionists might be as well, to write and develop work that not only talks or theorizes about contemplative practices but also provides transparent examples of how these practices (or concepts) may be enacted practically and critically.

Indiana, Pennsylvania

Works Cited

- Hurlbert, Claude. *National Healing: Race, State, and the Teaching of Writing*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2012. Print.
- Kirsch, Gesa E. “From Introspection to Action: Connecting Spirituality and Civic Engagement.” *CCC* 60.4 (2009): W1-W15. Print.
- Mao, LuMing. “Returning to Yin and Yang: From Terms of Opposites to Interdependence-in-Difference.” *Symposium: Comparative Rhetorical Studies in the New Contact Zone: Chinese Rhetoric Reimagined* 60.4 (2009): W45-W56. Print.
- O'Reilley, Mary Rose. *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998. Print.

- Spellmeyer, Kurt. *Buddha at the Apocalypse: Awakening from a Culture of Destruction*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2010. Print.
- Thompson, George J., and Jenkins, Jerry B. *Verbal Judo: The Gentle Art of Persuasion*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Print.
- Yamada, Koun. *The Gateless Gate: The Classic Book of Zen Koans*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2004. Print.