

August 13, 2017

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Mindfulness and Restorative Practices for the Educator

Learning Statement

I can't actually put my finger on when my journey into mindfulness began. Was it when my dad took me canoeing under a full moon on the Waterbury Reservoir one evening and as we soaked in the beauty of the moment he explained to me, "This is MY church. This is evidence to me that there is a power greater than ourselves,"? Was it when my competitive gymnastics coaches taught me to sit still, close my eyes, relax, and visualize myself doing each part of my gymnastics routine with perfection? Was it late one night when I couldn't sleep and my mom talked me through a relaxing body scan meditation to help me drift off to sleep? I'm not exactly sure. I do know that the many different paths and experiences I've walked through in my life, all seem to be pointing towards the same big idea: True happiness and serenity come from the practice of mindfulness.

My first formal introduction to meditation probably came my senior year at Mount Holyoke College when I took a course called Zen and Japanese Culture. The rumor was that this would be an easy A to end our undergraduate careers. While I enjoyed hanging out in the air conditioned lecture hall in the back row with my friends, I do still vividly remember some of the lessons my little old Japanese professor taught us. One day he brought a heart shaped dark chocolate for all 100 of us students. He told us to eat it. We happily obliged. Then, he gave us a second piece of the exact same chocolate. This time, he told us to close our eyes, and to put all of our attention of the sensation in our mouths and in our bodies as we slowly and mindfully ate the second piece. I'm telling you, to this day, that second piece is the best piece of chocolate I've ever had in my life. I also remember the one meditation I did during that semester as we were all required to attend one Japanese Tea ceremony in the Japanese Garden on campus. It was at least a 20 to 30 minute sitting meditation on little Japanese pillows. I remember feeling bored and my mind wandered. I decided to allow myself to fantasize about what kind of dog I wanted to have when I was a "grown up." I visualized a beautiful husky dog during that meditation. (Interestingly enough, a few years later, my dad and his new wife and step kids adopted a husky dog who we all quickly fell madly in love with.)

My next official experience with mindfulness came in my early thirties when I began attending Alanon meetings. Some important people in my life were struggling with alcoholism and I was desperate for some kind of relief from my despair. I quickly saw the power of Alanon and began working my own program with a caring and dedicated Alanon sponsor who has become a very trusted and valued friend. I learned how to explore my inner-life and to pause before responding. I learned to lean into the discomfort and to allow myself to feel difficult emotions. Some of the essential principles of Alanon include releasing responsibility and recognizing that the only power we have is over our own attitudes and reactions, that we can have serenity even when life is swirling around us, self-care is crucial, and to put our trust in a power greater than ourselves (it can be nature, energy, God, or whatever belief works for you). Many people who

work the Alanon program include daily meditation as a part of their program. I've been encouraged to incorporate that practice into my life many times, and while I've tried it from time to time, I have not yet established the habit.

Throughout my teaching career I've attended several workshops and one retreat which has pointed me towards the power of mindfulness in my life and in the classroom. The Yoga 4 Classrooms one-day workshop and the Courage and Renewal one-day retreat I did with David Leo-Nyquist are the most memorable. Before my dad passed away several years ago, he was a facilitator of the Courage and Renewal retreats. He spoke highly of their power to transform lives and he encouraged me to read and follow Parker Palmer's work. I was intrigued and inspired by my dad's work, and was very happy for the opportunity to participate in the one-day retreat that Courage and Renewal offered several summers ago. This was my first formal introduction to the restorative circle. I was blown away by the openness and vulnerability that this circle and our work together during that day allowed. I learned how to listen deeply with my whole heart, and how to ask questions where I didn't expect or anticipate any specific kind of answer. I felt deeply connected to the participants in this workshop at the end of our seven or eight hours together. I wasn't sure how to bring this work into my classroom at the time, but my experience in this class has given me all of the confidence and concrete tools I need to begin to bring the power of the circle into my classroom.

Yoga 4 Classrooms reminded me of the power of the breath and offered me a wide range of tools and activities that I can do with kids, to help them become more mindful. My favorite part of the Yoga 4 Classrooms pack are the "Imagination Vacations" because they are essentially meditations that kids can make sense of and connect with. They are easy-to-use scripts and I've done them both with students and with the staff during faculty meetings. The children's response to these meditations has been astounding. They are physically and emotionally calmed by them. They always ask for more. The other congruent thing is that some of these "Imagination Vacations" such as "A Special Friend" and "A Special Place" are very similar to meditations that I had naturally already been doing myself when I had trouble sleeping.

Finally, the other experience I've had with mindfulness in my personal life and in the classroom came last summer when I took a course at St. Michael's College with Sam Crowell called Nourishing the Inner-Life of the Educator. This course was designed to teach educators the importance and the how-tos of using mindfulness to take care of ourselves. We read a handful of articles and several texts, one of which has stuck with me. *The Heart Intelligence* by Doc Childre, Deborah Rozman, Rollin McCraty, and Howard Martin. My big takeaways from this book are that there have been scientific studies conducted that demonstrate the energetic power our heart and our cells have and that when we align the mind with the heart, we can send positive energy out into our communities and the world. Our emotions have a biological impact on every cell in our bodies, and the more we can do to be in tune with our inner lives, the more positive power we can have to restore ourselves and impact others. In this class we also had a lot of practice with sitting meditation, walking meditation, and Tai Chi. These experiences were

memorable and while I intended to maintain a personal mindfulness practice throughout the school year, I lost the discipline within the first few months.

This class, Mindfulness and Restorative Practices for the Educator, has re-ignited the spark that has shown itself frequently throughout my life. It has reminded me of the power of mindfulness in my personal life to offer me a sense of serenity and grounding amidst a chaotic world, and has also given me new insight on the power of restorative practices to transform the classroom and the greater community.

In my introduction to this class I wrote: *"I am taking this course because as I mentioned, on my good days, I think I am a pretty good teacher, but since the beginning of my career I've noticed that when my inner-life is malnourished, I am not my best self and my teaching suffers. I want to be able to be my best self for my students close to 100% of the time. Right now it feels like I'm somewhere between 50-75% of the time."*

After a week of taking this course, I feel so much closer to this goal now. I have found a time of day that will work for me to consistently meditate for my own personal practice. During the course I wrote:

"From Here, Now, Aware: The Power of Mindfulness" by Joseph Goldstein

Quote 1: "This realization is a turning point in everyone's spiritual life. We reach a certain point in our lives when something connects, and we acknowledge to ourselves, 'Yes, I can do this.'"

My understanding is that people who are seeking a spiritual connection in their lives probably walk a lot of different paths and explore many different avenues before they come to a place where they latch onto a spiritual practice that they feel is doable and sustainable.

My awareness related to this quote is that I think that I might be at this point. I've had a lot of different experiences in the last 10 to 20 years of my life that have lead me to seek spirituality. The practice of meditation has come up time and time again in many of the different experiences I've had. While I have tried it many different times, I haven't yet made it a habit. Just this past week though, I had one of those "aha" moments after my second or third day of doing a 3 minute timed meditation after my kids went to bed, where I realized exactly what this writer said, "I can do this!" I don't know why I didn't consider this time slot before. The suggestion of doing it first thing in the morning has always made me instantly say, "NO WAY!" as I am NOT a morning person and I know I don't have the discipline to make it a morning habit. Right before bed is too late and I'd just want to lie down and go to sleep. The middle of the work day is crazy and chaotic and I always feel like I have too many things to do in the middle of the school day. But after my kids go to bed but an hour before I go to bed is perfect. I CAN do this.

My intention related to this quote is to maintain this practice every night through the school year. I intend to make my timed meditation at least five minutes and to build this habit into my evening routine. I hope to experience and notice changes in myself as I hone my meditation practice.

This alone, will likely help me accomplish my goal of being my best self as close to 100% of the time in the classroom as possible. Consistently practicing mindfulness will allow me to pause and to become grounded more easily during the chaos of the school day. It will help me to pay attention to my own emotions and reactions, and to choose wisely about how to react. A

consistent personal practice will also help me develop compassion for myself, and accept my mind exactly how it is. More compassion for myself will inevitably lead to more compassion for my students and colleagues.

I also feel like I have gained a concrete understanding of how to establish restorative circles as a part of my classroom community. With a little practice, I'm sure I will gain enough confidence to introduce this to my colleagues as well. I've already shared a little bit of mindfulness with them during weekly staff meetings, and I am hopeful that I can stretch this further to teaching them about the power of restorative practices.

Another eye-opening experience for me was learning about the nature of shame. It helped me understand why some kids are able to recover and learn from shame while others spiral downward when they experience it. It helped me develop a new kind of compassion for kids (and adults) who cannot do the restoring and repairing work that is required when they have caused harm. After reading the article about shame I wrote:

From "Why is it Important to Teach Kids about Shame?" by Bill Hansberry

Quote 1: "When shame strikes and we don't feel loved and accepted, we are completely helpless to do anything constructive with shame. Only the loved and connected can do anything positive with shame."

My understanding of this quote is that when a person does something that negatively impacts others, and they realize it has negatively impacted others, they will feel shame. Only those people who have strong relationships and feel valued by other individuals can do the hard work of owning their mistake and repairing it. Those who don't feel loved and connected to others are not able to work their way through the difficult task of restoring and repairing their mistake.

My awareness of this quote is that I had an instant "AHA!" experience when I read this. Of course! It makes so much sense now! Through my experiences as a parent and as a teacher, I've read and heard many people preach about how terrible shame is and how we should never make kids feel shame. Quite honestly, I've thoroughly disagreed with that premise. When my son hits someone, or shouts mean words, I want him to feel ashamed of that behavior. It's not okay to intentionally hurt someone else simply because he didn't get a new lego set at the toy store (for example.) What this quote made me realize is that it's not shame per se that's bad, it's when a child who already feels deep shame and lacks loving relationships is handed another dose of shame without any way of working his way through it, that's harmful. I can think back to a handful of students, using this lens, and I realize how true this was for them. I shamed them by calling them out on their disruptive behaviors (standing on desks, kicking chairs, running away, etc.) and they had no way of doing the restoring and repairing work with me because they didn't have meaningful relationships with others (parents or myself) that helped them understand that while their behavior was harmful in that moment, they themselves are still valued and loved by others. Therefore, shame did not work in a positive way for them. They jumped on the Compass of Shame and lived there for the rest of the school year.

I have had a couple of interactions with my own sons since I have read this article and I've been relieved to see that they were able to own and repair with me. Last night my 5 year old was swinging a branch around the backyard. He accidentally whacked me on the leg and I

immediately shouted "OW!" The 5 year old instantly cowered and said, "I'm sorry mommy, I'm sorry mommy!" He began whimpering and sucking his thumb. I pulled him onto my lap and told him, "I'm okay and I know it was an accident, but what lesson do you think I want you to learn from this?" He replied something about not swinging branches around and I clarified that I don't mind him doing that action, but that I want him to be aware of what's around him and notice how his actions might impact those around him. He agreed that he would try to do this. And then I thought, "Phew! He has a meaningful relationship with me. He knows he is loved and valued as a person, even if his behavior hurt me. That's why he was able to own it and try to repair it."

My intention is to remember this notion going forward in all of my interactions with kids. I will try to pay attention to the responses kids have when they experience shame, and see if they are able to do the brave and hard work of owning the mistake and repairing, or do they display the behaviors on The Compass of Shame. Noticing this will allow me to help students who really can't own and repair, make more meaningful relationships both with me and with the guidance counselor, as well as with other students in the class. It will also allow me to feel more compassion for them, as the Compass of Shame behaviors indicate that they lack a loving and trustworthy relationship. How hard that must be, to not feel unconditional love from an adult in their life.

Now that I am able to understand exactly why relationships and connections we have with others is so important, I understand much better why restorative practices are the key to dealing with behavior in our schools. My experiences with circles, both in this class and in other settings, lead me to believe that establishing the practice of restorative circles in my third grade classroom will be central to the restorative work that will inevitably come up during the school year.

All of this learning leads me to setting two concrete action steps for the upcoming year (and beyond!)

Action step # 1: To meditate daily, at least five minutes at a time. I will do this nightly after my children go to bed. I will use a timer or an app to signal when my time is up. I might even set a reminder on my phone so that I remember to do it each night.

Action step # 2: To establish the practice of restorative circles in my third grade classroom. I will need a basket with materials to use as a centerpiece, printed copies of the group norms, and a talking piece. I will start on the very first hour of the very first day of school, and then I intend to make our Friday morning meetings a restorative circle time. From there, I will use circles at a variety of times, whenever issues come up that need discussing. I am hoping to stay connected throughout the year with Amanda Eldridge and other people who took this class, so that we can encourage, troubleshoot, and collaborate on how our restorative circles are progressing.