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A Psychologist's Journey Toward the Integration of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Psychotherapy: Beginning Again

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In our modern world it has always been assumed...that in order to observe oneself all that is required is for a person to "look within." No one ever imagines that self-observation may be a highly disciplined skill which requires longer training than any other skill we know of,.. In contrast to this, one could very well say that the heart of the psychological disciplines of the East and the ancient Western world consists of training at self-study. (Jacob Needleman, author of A Sense of the Cosmos, personal communication.)

For many years, without quite naming it. I realize that I have been searching for a kind of integrity in my life. At times, this seems to have consisted of questioning conventional versions of reality. As an elementary school-aged child, I kept a journal about myself that I recently re-discovered. It was entitled, "Things I've noticed about Diane." In it, I wrote entries such as the following: "When I pick up a grapefruit. I experience its shape before I experience its texture." "When I let peas melt on my tongue, I experience saltiness on one part of my tongue, and sweetness on the other," It wasn't until I became a teacher of Shakespeare and the great literary classics, The History of Eastern and Western Philosophy and Religion, and eventually a Diversity Coordinator. that I was able to articulate the idea that the great writers and thinkers throughout all cultures and ages were great because they were able to *tell it like it is* with great specificity. For instance, adolescents loved discussing Plato and Socrates because the latter pointed out that since we live most of our so-called waking existence in dreams and a sleep-like state, "the unexamined life is not worth living," and the most essential inquiry a human being could make is to explore the question, "who am I?" Good literature, like good art and science, raises such questions

rather than giving answers. Eventually, formally studying clinical psychology, I underwent Jungian analysis in order to prepare to undertake an in-depth empirical study of women's dreams. As part of this exploration, I discovered that the accepted canon of how women's dreams were differentiated from men's dreams did not hold and was able to identify new themes being dreamed by contemporary women (Handlin & Levin, 1995).

After my clinical psychology internship at Robert Wood Johnson, I had the great good fortune to co-lead Dr. Bert Cohen's Double T group for several years. It was a group in which psychologists, psychology interns, psychiatric residents, and psychiatric clients carrying severe psychiatric diagnoses functioned as equal co-members. It confirmed my belief that human beings are basically mysterious, miraculous beings who often live in small parts of themselves, never tapping their full potential and true vitality. It taught me the healing power of moving beyond duality, polarity, and hierarchy. In a sense, it brought *heart to mind*. It was a group in which there were many tears shed as well as much laughter. I experienced first hand how participants could develop more flexible, complex senses of self. The patients were able to get in touch with the healer inside them and the therapists were able to get in touch with the patient within them. Once again, I was learning to think "outside the box."

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Having been a meditator and an avid client/appreciator of good therapy since I was an adolescent, I had been attracted to Eastern thought because at its core, like great Western thought, it seemed to reject a reliance on dualistic thinking. Asian languages, for instance, do not use separate words for mind and heart, and the Tibetans in their rich lexicon for describing inner experience, have 250 different words for different states of being. For many years, I had functioned with admonitions from both my meditation teachers and my psychology supervisors that my meditative life and my life as a psychologist should be kept separate. I worked hard to maintain

those boundaries. Yet. I knew that it was my meditative practice that often helped me to be most present to my patients.

In my best training as a psychologist, I had also learned that it was not helpful to trust our habitual, cognitive versions of reality. In terms of my education as a psychologist, Winnicott's work, particularly his description of a holding environment. helped me name the practice of presence and attentiveness in my clinical encounters. Working on being more fully present helped me learn to listen for information more complex than the stories the clients and I had learned to tell ourselves. The deepening understanding of the connectedness among the diverse strands of my experience has led me to deliberately integrate mindfulness meditation and psychotherapy in a way that has proved extremely enlivening for my clients and my self.

Teaching Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as: "...the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145). It is one thing to have a practice of mindfulness, however. and quite another to teach mindfulness. Realizing that getting training to teach mindfulness had to be taken as seriously as getting training in order to be a psychologist. I decided to begin in depth training in Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) because of its systematic and creative curriculum, its extensive research base, and its emphasis on an egalitarian approach reflecting humility and dignity. MBSR, originating at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn from his personal Zen and Insight practices in order to treat patients suffering from stress due to physical and psychological illness. He had found that while people in general were often unwilling to talk about their suffering, they were quite willing to talk about their stress, a topic about which there was extensive research dating back to the 1960's. Using a format of eight week, two and a half hour sessions, and a daylong intensive to complement 45 minutes per day of mindfulness practice homework (six days per week) consisting of "formal" sitting meditation, body scan exercise, and mindful yoga, as well as "informal" practices such as mindful eating and mindful walking, Jon Kabat-Zinn began treating and undertaking research on

clients who were experiencing chronic pain, depression, binge eating, psoriasis, heart disease, cancer related stress, fibromyalgia, and stress from situational overload. In more recent years, he has taken his work to a variety of other sites. including numerous workplaces and the executive boardroom. The empirical research is quite clear that MBSR is helpful in ameliorating a broad range of problems. After training with Jon Kabat-Zinn and Saki Santorelli at Omega Institute and after practicum training on how to teach MBSR at the Center for Mindfulness and Stress Reduction at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, I began teaching MBSR to both individuals and groups, ranging in age from adolescents through septuagenarians.

Beginning to teach MBSR, and following the principle that one should never ask others to do what one is not practicing oneself. I made a commitment to keep my practice of mindfulness central to my life. Clients for the groups came from referrals from other therapists, referrals from the Center for Mindfulness and Stress Reduction website. and from a series of talks given in various public venues. I interviewed each potential member in depth to assess for seriousness of purpose and willingness to make a sincere commitment to eight weeks of practice, and to rule out severe pathology. Once the group had been selected, I sent a letter to each member outlining the requirements for practice and homework, cautioning that as Zinn says, "this is not a dime store remedy." and reminding each participant that while undertaking to change a life takes discipline and commitment, the rewards are great. The adult groups were comprised of professionals including psychologists, physicians, educational administrators, attorneys, librarians, artists, and a mathematician, along with non-professionals including full-time parents and retirees. Upon asking group members what their hopes and expectations for the eight week course were, the following responses were offered: "To get in touch with the me who I do not know," "To grow old well," "To have more balance," "To not always be on the way to something," "To live with more grace," "To go back 30 years... the glitter that I pursued turned out not to be what I thought when I got closer," "To be part of a meditative community," "To reclaim the self I once was." After each group, I would type up notes from the class and send them to members as an extra support for mindfulness during the week. I also made my own CDs of a Body

Scan, Sitting Meditation, and Mindful Gentle Yoga for all of the group members.

The MBSR Curriculum

The group experience could be conceptualized as a search for wholeness through experimentation with each participant as their own lab and the group as a mega lab or central lab where experiences could be brought for processing and discussion. Our toolbox included Zinn's curriculum, our articulation and remembering with as much of ourselves as we could muster that which had brought us together, our inborn curiosity, our commitment to researching in the scientific inquiry tradition of Buddha and Socrates, i.e., to verify everything for ourselves, and a healthy dash of poetry. Poetry was useful for helping us to express out commonality, our fragility, our vulnerability, and our hopes. The underlying principle that shaped our inquiry was the renewing of attention to sensation of the body, i.e., becoming mindful of having and being in a body, the mindfulness work beginning through the practicing of the body scan, which is an attempt to bring an affectionate attention to each part of the body. non-judgmentally, simply accepting what is. Also, in the early weeks of the course, mindfulness-based yoga and sitting meditation with particular attention to breath were introduced. Participants in the lab of their own lives began reporting experiences of reconnecting to nature and reconnecting to positive early experiences. "How wonderful it is to really look at the grass and really see it." "I'm noticing things I normally don't notice like the wild strawberries coming up." "I found myself walking like I walked as a child. not walking to get somewhere but just for the experience of walking." Mindfulness, thus, became a tool for self discovery. Participants began to report a more genuine connection to themselves and a new relationship to their world. Also, the therapists who had referred their clients reported that their clients had begun to bring their mindfulness experiences to their individual therapy sessions. It was through these experiences of what is called *beginner's mind* that we were all fine tuning our attention so that we might have a chance to approach the more challenging task of accurately observing the nature of our thoughts and feelings. All of us worked at slowing things down through renewing and deepening our connection to the stability of our bodily sensations and breathing. We recognized that for this to occur. we must repeatedly begin again,

working from the principle that what is absolutely essential is to aim small and close, to be in the moment, and to attempt to sincerely and non-judgmentally see what is.

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For the skillful practice of mindfulness, not unlike successful therapy, one needs to refine the abilities to pay attention, to bring good will, and to commit to being as real as possible. As participants began to become more acquainted with themselves through their daily practice of paying attention mindfully, a renewed sensitivity to their emotional states and their thinking patterns developed. Participants willingly shared discoveries like the following with each other. "In the middle of the day I saw my mind racing from one thing to another." "I found myself throwing things down (eating) while working, opening mail, doing other things." "How critical I am of myself and the world." "I'm always judging myself." "I pick up the phone and talk, but don't really listen." "It was good to see my tiredness." "It hit me: any time I want something, I become less mindful because I am focused on what I want." The processing of these experiences led to a real questioning of how accurately or inaccurately experience was normally perceived. Most were unaware before mindfulness training of how deeply on automatic pilot they were. Also, participants began to notice how what they reacted to was often not the direct experience itself, but their thoughts and stories about the experience. The insights that developed from discussing this material included a growing awareness that each person was more than the aggregation of their fluctuating sensations, emotions, and thoughts. As a result of practicing awareness of bodily sensations, participants began to experiment with mindfully following a sensation, thought, or emotion as it arises, changes, and ebbs, the way one might follow a full breath in and out, or the sound of a meditation bell from beginning to end.

Seeing the narratives that get attached to emotional reactions was a particularly powerful experience for participants. This is one of the most useful benefits of the integration of psychotherapy and mindfulness. Almost everyone in the group was either currently in therapy, or had been in therapy and many found they were becoming mindful of, as one person put it, "seeing all my old stuff," and how by being mindful of that material they could just be with it without trying to change it or wishing it wasn't there. One participant came up with a metaphor in one group that this painful material could be experienced as, "boats on a river just passing and I can wave at them." Another member, in her seventies, spoke of beginning to learn the value of how to shift aspirations and aiming to become a "C" student. This metaphor then became one of the ways that the group's participants would individually and collectively process this material. Also, as ingrained patterns of thinking and reacting to the world revealed themselves, participants, as a result of being mindful, began experiencing how their faulty cognitions often resulted in their "feeling stuck," "always responding like that," or "repeating ad nauseum." How to slow reactions down by being really mindful, how to respond instead of reacting, how to see one's reaction and accept it, how to begin again, how to begin small, became matters of vital interest and were woven into the homework assignments suggested between sessions.

The Resistance

In many ways the practice of mindfulness seems so simple, yet it is one of the hardest things in the world because one is up against one's habituation and resistance to change. By week four, we began to notice that, as I had predicted in my initial letter to the group, *Preparing the Soil for a Lifestyle Change*, "the romance was over." After our initial enthusiasm and the energy it brought, participants began to struggle with greater resistance to establishing mindfulness as part of the fabric of their ongoing lives. This became another arena around which the group members became mindful—giving themselves permission to accept their resistance to change. For some, the earliest form their resistance had taken and their response to it meant becoming mindful of feeling guilty for taking time for themselves. For others, the paradox was that in wanting to reduce stress, another time demand. (45 minutes, six days a week practice

time), was being added to their already demanding lives. Some were initially getting up early in order to practice, but were now finding it difficult to do so. Participants became mindful of criticizing themselves for not formally practicing as regularly as they had hoped they would. What was helpful at this point was to have participants remember in as much sensory detail as possible, the experience of what their life was like when they practiced more formally. Then, they were encouraged to become just as deeply interested, with affection. and in as much detail as possible. as non-judgmentally as possible, in the experience of the qualitative difference in what their lives were like now with less commitment to formal practice. This included an exploration of the complex texture of states they were naming such as boredom, anger, and frustration. Participants offered the following during this period: "I have trouble settling (informal meditation practice)." "I find my mind often elsewhere I must be like this a lot. but not aware of it." "At work I would be mindful entering the office and then the next time I would remember to be mindful was when I was leaving." These sincere and carefully described observations supported others' being able to name what was actually happening in them, to see how partial their attention was. and to help others become interested in knowing themselves afresh, We all began to see how rare it is to be able to stay with anything, because without renewed attention, "everything, drifts off." and, "I'm taken by everything." It was in this period of mindful observation of resistance that participants came more vividly face to face with the quality of their attention/inattention and realized that in order to sustain their practice, they need to continually renew a heartfelt vision of what they most deeply had wanted. The work and the conversation became centered around how to keep one's interest alive in the face of inevitable setbacks. Members realized that renewal of intention was essential to maintaining one's practice and the key to long term change. Settling into the sensory reality of the present moment in the presence of other group members often provided the necessary ignition. Mindfulness practice enabled participants to be more present with interest in everything. including resistance, as opposed to succumbing to the dualistic idea that they were either interested or not interested.

The Insights

What characterized the groups, and what can't adequately be expressed in words, is how, in the collective sharing of our habitual emotional and mental slates, we recognized and met each other. We all had our own accommodations and reactions to our stress, pain, and inadequacy. But, so often, each one spoke for all of us. Remarkably, there was no need for anyone to console anyone. Most often, what was genuine, honest, and heartfelt was expressed without inflation or romanticism. We let each other's stress be there side by side, shoulder to shoulder. There was frequently a collective humor. At times, this took the form of a belly laugh humor of embarrassed recognition, i.e., when one of us would fall asleep during a body scan and begin snoring loudly. At other times we were light and giddy as we felt close to the heart of some aspect of our shared humanity. At other moments, we resonated to each others conflicts and struggles. At still others, there was a collective sense of silence and stillness born from the meditation practices. We were present to each other's unfolding. each somehow enlivened by the other's experience, whether in our frustration and sadness or in our experience of greater wholeness.

By the later classes the group members became increasingly comfortable and skillful in making subtle discriminations in their experiences. Because participants learned how to slow down and identify what was happening in them, they often felt more in control and, thus, could make more constructive choices. We kept journals of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences, noticing that we tended to dwell on the extremes, particularly the negative inner and Outer events, and rarely were able, as Thich Nat Hahn phrases it so eloquently in his oral teaching, "to be able to enjoy the absence of toothache." There was a softening—on automatic pilot one tends to be rigid and inflexible. "When mindfully present, time seems to expand for me. I relax freed from thinking about the next place I have to be or the next thing I have to do." "I noticed on the way here that I get so angry when traffic slows up, then a good song comes on the radio and I feel good, then the traffic would slow up again. Then I realized my inner world was at the complete mercy of everything outside of me." "I have discovered that if I hold off. I usually do not act along the lines of my first reaction. I've realized that I have time usually, almost always, not to act immediately." "In the past when I went into a beautiful garden, I would be taken by its beauty and lose

myself. This time I found I could remain inside myself and enjoy the garden outside." "While buying a pool for my kids at a WalMart, I was suddenly really connected inside my body and enjoyed just pushing the shopping cart and being in the moment. I'm never like that in stores." "I've spent many moments in the last few days being mindful of times when I want something to be different, observing it, my body's reaction, and when possible, slowing down to a state in which I realize everything is fine. Trying to shift into being instead of doing, being aware of the process. and shifting from wanting something specific to watching something unfold." I was able to take in the garden the way on rare occasions I take in music, hearing every instrument." "I realized I don't take into account the positive experiences as much as the bad and have even let the bad overshadow neutral moments which occur quite often at work. Now I try to leave the old script where it is, give it a nod, and move on." "I've learned not to allow worry to take over the present moment." "I was able to stay in touch with my body while being aware of what I wanted. It helped me to accept my difficulties with my daughter without wishing things to be different." "Someone at work made me so angry I had a panic attack in the car on the way home. I started mindful breathing and it helped. Then, I realized it's an old script from my interaction with my former husband." Significantly, participants realized that their stress and suffering wasn't going to disappear. It was exciting for them to just see it, be with it, know it wasn't them, share it with the group, and, then, in many instances bring it to their individual therapy sessions.

A way of being fully in the moment, and not a state of relaxation or a dropping out, mindfulness training transformed participants in surprising ways. Examining self-protective strategies, participants learned to make minor adjustments. They began to turn over the soil of negativity and become mindful of how to work with their stress, displaying a willingness to let go of what happened to them. They really looked at and studied how they responded to events both outer and inner, and courageously examined the tendency (often unconscious) of wanting to hold on to what is good and push away what is painful. Also, they examined the nature of their wanting things to be different, i.e., realizing from experience that wanting things to be different robbed them of their availability to experience the richness that lies in themselves in each moment. They grew and grew up,

moving away from feelings that what happened to them, no matter what it was, wasn't fair. In short, they stopped thinking about themselves and started being more fully themselves. Generally, there was a movement away from a state of avoiding pain to an interest in being more alive and whole, and an acceptance as Zinn often puts it, that, "there is more right with us than wrong with us." The group sharing repeatedly revealed that stress is a universal fact of life. As the group members were working to slow themselves down, they began finding that expanding their awareness to include awareness of their bodies allowed them to begin to modulate their responses, to become less automatically reactive, and to make new and creative choices. In many ways, they became more skillful at being present to the moment of recognizing that while they couldn't change the pleasant and unpleasant experiences in their lives, they could have some influence over their reactions to these events. They shifted from the deeply held assumption that if they could just shape the world to their liking they would be happy, and began to move out of more self-centered views of themselves toward more openness and acceptance of being more fully human. Participants experienced the difference or distinction between pain (which is inevitable), and suffering (the stories we tell ourselves about our pain). In this regard, mindfulness offers an approach to healing that complements the western psychotherapeutic tradition, potentially enlivening and deepening the experience for both client and clinician.

I cannot end without thanking my husband. Dr. Jim Handlin, who has been a partner and full participant par excellence in this journey, as well as the teachers, colleagues, clients and students who have challenged me and enriched my understanding all along the way.

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