Developing a Mindful University

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“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. ... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence” (William James, 1890).

What More Can We Do?

Can you recall the lyrics to “A Day in the Life” by The Beatles? If not, you may actually be living the lyrics: “Woke up, fell out of bed, dragged a comb across my head. Found my way downstairs and had a cup, and looking up, I noticed I was late. Found my coat and grabbed my hat, made the bus in seconds flat. Found my way upstairs and had a smoke, and somebody spoke, and I went into a dream. Ah!” If you find that you have been running on autopilot throughout the day and have a hard time being fully present in any given moment without your mind being ‘somewhere else’, you are not alone.

Now more than ever, mindfulness is a capacity that must be understood and cultivated in any university that hopes to advance its mission in an authentic fashion. Mindfulness is something that can be developed through formal meditation practices and also happens to be a particularly helpful way of being in relationship with the fetters of daily life. As it pertains to our purpose at the university, developing this faculty in ourselves and our students is a particularly helpful way of addressing a critical question that President Sullivan asked in her convocation address, “What more can we do to develop our students’ empathy, mindfulness, self-reflection, comfort with ambiguity, imagination and optimism?” (Sullivan, 2013). The central hope in producing this article is to inspire our university as-a-whole, not only to learn from the past and plan for the future, but also to help students do more in the present moment to embody each of these characteristics.

This article will first offer a brief history and working definition of mindfulness. Next, it will illustrate some of the unique benefits of integrating mindfulness as both a formal practice and way of being in university life and beyond. To highlight these points this article will share a number of strategies currently being incorporated and tested by students, faculty, and staff at the University of St Thomas. Finally, this article will discuss what it means to develop a more mindful university, and invite you to explore a number of initiatives and resources, which are collectively contributing to this aim at the University of St Thomas.
A Brief History

Mindfulness Practice is estimated to be over 25,000 years old, and since its inception it has been assimilated into numerous cultures and represented through a myriad of philosophical streams, practices, and aims. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts, has recently emerged as a primary figure in leading this practice back into the spotlight, in part because he has inspired an unprecedented level of medical research in the area. Respected peer review articles on mindfulness have grown exponentially (Figure A), stemming mainly from Kabat-Zinn’s adaptation of mindfulness for medicine and society.

Despite this growing body of research, there is still confusion in the U.S. as to what mindfulness practice really is. With countless misperceptions afoot, any attempt to define and develop a Mindful University first requires a very careful grounding in the original meaning of mindfulness. After coming to a definition of mindfulness practice, this article will demonstrate how most initiatives at the University of St Thomas can benefit not only through formal meditation practice but also by incorporating mindfulness as a way of being. In other words you will learn more about what it means to be mindful beyond formal practices such as sitting meditation or yoga, and how our professors and staff are being proactive in integrating, practicing, and modeling this intentionally wakeful of being.

Figure A. Peer reviewed articles on mindfulness practice published by year (Black, 2013).

Toward a Working Definition

Defining mindfulness is really tricky! If Buddha were alive today he might gently smile and tell us that no one has cornered the market on mindfulness practice because there is no ‘market’ to be cornered. Many of those who practice mindfulness on a full time basis have come to recognize that there is no specific aim other than to set a humble yet firm intention to see world in its purity, beyond the clouds of
our assumptions, anxieties, and attachments. The gift of mindfulness is in simply being, rather than getting ‘caught in thought’ as Dr. Kabat-Zinn likes to put it. Nonetheless, society likes benefits and to understand how mindfulness can benefit our university, we must develop some semblance of a working definition.

Having the great fortune of studying extensively under Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, and infusing it in both my research agenda and service initiatives at the university, I like to stick with his definition. I appreciate his definition because it seems to comport well with the way modern society presently relates with experience and greater purpose. He describes mindfulness practice as “an 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).

Considering this definition, mindfulness practice teaches us a lot about what it means to define anything. Zen tradition suggests that when we delineate anything we are essentially creating an abstraction or separation, which fragments reality. Nonetheless, planning what we will do and how you will comport yourself throughout the day, both processes requiring separation and identification, is certainly helpful to our professional growth and productivity. Yet as practitioners will caution, the more we define ourselves and our worlds the more fragmented our realities become and the further we distance ourselves from both the present moment and the unlimited nature of our potential. In this way, the shadow side of coming to a definition is the danger of a single pernicious idea, which acts like a crack in the windshield, spreading erratically and without warning.

**Benefits of Being in the Moment**

It is primarily through the wisdom of momentarily entering reality as it is, outside of our interference, that medical practitioners have hypothesized a number of health-related benefits associated with mindfulness. Just consider some of the negative consequences of being a fragmented or compartmentalized self: stress, anxiety, depression, and even despair. A great example self-fragmentation is operating off of the assumption that we live two separate and distinct lives, such as a ‘work life’ and a ‘home life.’ When we separate what it means to live at work versus home we become destined for anxiety. That is because conceptually, as long as we work, we are never ‘fully living.’ The question that mindfulness asks of us is, ‘Is it possible to experience life as a ‘whole’, in its fullness without separation or identification?’

The measured benefits of cultivating mindfulness are many. In a recent study, groups participating in a *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* course (MBSR) developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (see PBS documentary), demonstrated a substantial physiological increase in brain matter density (Figures B & C) associated with learning and memory processes, emotional regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking (Holzel et al., 2011). Studies also show that many of the positive results associated with mindfulness meditation extend beyond the formal practice, back into everyday life. Click here to learn more about these studies and affiliated research centers, including facilities at Harvard, Duke, Stanford, Brown, and Vanderbilt.
Figure B. Change in gray matter concentration within clusters in the posterior cingulate cortex in MBSR and control group participants (Holzel et al., 2011).

Figure C. Increase in brain matter concentration in the MBSR group from Pre- to Post-intervention (Holzel et al., 2011).

**Formal Practice**

There are a number of formal practices associated with sustaining greater awareness, all of which are currently offered at the University. One such practice is Yoga, which according to tradition is suggested to prime the pumps for being present by helping us get back into our own bodies. Then there is a set of related mindfulness practices, including sitting, standing, body-scan, walking, and even eating meditation. For those who are completely unfamiliar with meditation, in sitting meditation the participant:

... maintains an upright sitting posture, either in a chair or cross-legged on the floor and attempts to maintain attention on a particular focus, most commonly the somatic sensations in his or her own breathing. Whenever attention wanders from the breath to the inevitable thoughts and feelings that arise, the client will simply take notice of them and then let them go as attention is returned to the breath. As sitting meditation is practiced, there is an emphasis on simply taking notice of whatever the mind happens to wander to and accepting each object without making judgments about it or elaborating on its implications, additional meanings, or need for action (Bishop et. al, 2004, p. 232).

In such a formal practice, participants set the intention to be with their senses (breathing, hearing, smelling, and the sensation of feeling) rather than making sense of them. Regular practice is said to help participants re-enter life with something resembling a *Beginner’s Mind*, where they practice seeing the
world for the first time, moment by moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009) has written much on the importance of developing a beginner’s mind:

Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we “know” prevent us from seeing things as they really are...An open, “beginner’s” mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in a rut of our expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 35).

Beginner’s mind is just one of the many attitudinal dimensions cultivated through mindfulness practice. Others include being more flexible, patient, less judgmental, trusting, non-striving, and accepting. Two close mentors of mine, Dr. Lyle Yorks and Dr. Elizabeth Kasl, suggest that those who lead learning initiatives might reconceptualize experience as a phenomenological process that necessitates more of an affective ‘experiencing’ of a shared moment:

Casting experience as a verb instead of a noun - that is, conceptualizing experience phenomenologically instead of pragmatically – leads educators to examine how they can assist learners in sharing a felt sense of the other’s experience instead of reflecting on its meaning (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p. 186).

Though mindfulness itself cannot be directly measured, these dimensions are now being measured through a number of psychometrically validated instruments. Part of my research agenda includes correlating attributes of formal and informal mindfulness practice (i.e. acting with awareness and accepting without judgment) with the success of organizational development initiatives. A full list of current literature regarding these measurement instruments can be found at www.mindfulexperience.org. Some of the more popular measurements include: the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003); Cognitive Affective Mindfulness Scale (Feldman et. al, 2007); Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness (Baer et. al, 2004); and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (Buchheld et. al, 2001)

Change the “Be” You Wish to See in the World

Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted on refrigerator magnets and bumper stickers as saying, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” The truth of the matter is that Gandhi never said this. Instead, I believe that this catchphrase (beautiful in its own way) was a misinterpretation of a much deeper insight by Gandhi, which can be found in his autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth: “As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him” (Gandhi, 1958, p. 241).

When the commercialized version is flipped inside-out it becomes a far more accurate translation of Gandhi’s hope, to “Change the be you wish to see in the world.” This slight rotation in one’s relationship with change suggests that by extending a formal mindfulness practice into a dharma or way of being, we can indeed transform the world. It is only when this form of change takes place en masse, that our University as-a-whole may become verifiably mindful and transformative. What makes this form of
change so difficult for most of us is that it seeks no recognition, heroism, or pride. Mindfulness is a gift given without a ‘by-line.’

Consider the late Nelson Mandela, who entered prison with a more aggressive orientation to change, and exited a transformed personage: wise, graceful, and forgiving. In addition to being released from the prison of Robben Island, Mandela released himself from the prison of many unhelpful attachments, anxieties, and narratives. No longer an embodiment of a system that perpetuated violence, Mandela’s very way of being had changed. This transformation seemed counterintuitive to many and was even experienced as an embarrassing form of surrender by some of Mandela’s closest companions. It took the world a while to recognize that Mandela had practiced a more profound and liberating form of surrender. Today many celebrate Mandela for impacting the world through this unlikely orientation to change.

Changing our way of being involves mindfully surrendering our personal narratives and expectations aside momentarily when we enter dialogue with others, feel ‘stuck’ at the strategic drawing board, or get frustrated as a result of making the same mistakes over and over again. Yet the process of moving from a formal practice to a way of being is never ending, and many of our colleagues are taking the lead in this regard by identifying opportunities to be mindful throughout the day.

**Being Mindful at the University**

William James once quipped, “Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake” (1890). Because it is so easy to slip out of fuller awareness during our daily activities, it is helpful to plant reminders and integrate practices in our existing routines. Chaskalson (2011), who has done much work to adapt mindfulness practice to organizational development initiatives, suggests that one of the best things we can do is to seek routine spaces in the workplace. Consider the amazing opportunity we have to be mindful when eating breakfast or lunch:

...to have the experience, just once, of eating a single meal mindfully...
It’s best here to choose a simple meal – a bowl of muesli, perhaps, or a sandwich or a piece of fruit. Really pay attention to each aspect of the meal, letting all of your senses fully engage with the process and noticing what you discover in each moment as you proceed (Chaskalson, 2011, p. 53).

In facilitating a faculty learning circle on *Meditation and Mindfulness in Teaching* at the University of St. Thomas alongside Dr. Carol Bruess, we discovered a number of unsuspecting daily activities practiced by professors to be in greater awareness. One includes a regular five minute meditation as part of course preparation just prior to entering the classroom. Another practice is mindfully walking up the stairs from one’s office to the lecture hall, while drawing and sustaining awareness to every footstep (and nothing else). A third favorite is taking time to experience the way water evaporates from the skin when placed under a warm hand-drier. A group of professors joked that the hand-drier technique has become...
quite popular, causing veritable traffic jams in the restroom. Fortunately, mindfulness also teaches us to laugh at ourselves.

Some professors have even started to facilitate mindfulness practice with students at the beginning of each class because they concur with the pedagogical principle, that “…reciprocity and attunement with students supports their development and contributes to social and emotional learning” (Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009, p. 37). For each of these professors, incorporating mindfulness into routines also provides a practical way of rediscovering the joy of serving students for the first time, every time.

Last summer, Dr. Vanessa Cornett-Murtada and I facilitated a workshop for professors on strategically integrating mindfulness into teaching. Frankly, we were shocked by the results. Thirty professors in attendance developed what seemed like an infinite list of ways to be mindful in serving students before, during, and after class. Here is a summary of just some of the ideas that were generated and are now being practiced by this growing community:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades and Assessments</th>
<th>Awareness of Students in Classroom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Creating exams mindfully.</td>
<td>• Pay fuller attention to students and listen more completely.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Staying present while grading.</td>
<td>• Be better able to handle defensiveness on my part when in a difficult classroom situation.</td>
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<td>• Mindfully not being exclusively “grade centered.”</td>
<td>• Seize and relish moments to pause and ask the class to be aware of processes, comments, and events that have occurred in our midst.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Being aware of distractions when responding to student papers.</td>
<td>• Develop a sense of community and togetherness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Becoming more oriented to the students minds when doing (or avoiding) grading.</td>
<td>• Hear the entirety of a student’s question before formulating a response.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mindfully combat procrastination and distraction around grading.</td>
<td>• Notice when students are bored or confused and adjust in real time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create activities or assignments that allow students to use mindfulness to learn material. Integrate mindfulness in class participation grade.</td>
<td>• I’d like to be more aware of how classroom activities are being perceived and experienced by my students.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teaching Mindfulness in and out of the classroom</th>
<th>Self-Awareness</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Shift focus away from “I have to learn X amount by the time I finish/graduate this course” to a less judgmental progression/journey.</td>
<td>• Find peace with all of the tasks I do not enjoy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Integrate mindfulness in teaching (course content) if it fits everywhere.</td>
<td>• Feel more engaged in teaching, more present, instead of feeling like it is an interruption to other things I need to get done or other places I’d rather be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• During class activities, circulate/engage students to ‘be with’ and reflect on what they are doing.</td>
<td>• Be more mindful of students as individuals (whole person).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Deepen integration and understanding of context.</td>
<td>• Become more efficient by managing the past/present.</td>
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• Make our daily free-writing exercise more mindful.
• Explicitly model for students in class. Talk about what mindfulness is.
• End a class with breath, not "out of breath!"

• Become calm by removing judgment.
• Not radiate anxiety, fear, vulnerability, and self-loathing.
• Find joy in what I’m doing.

Some of the most profound insights around everyday mindfulness were stimulated recently at the Mind Body Dialogues event, which included an interview between MPR’s Kathy Wurzer, Bruce Kramer (former Dean of CELC), and Matthew Sanford (Founder of Mind Body Solutions). With over 800 attendees packed into Woulfe Auditorium, this event stimulated a number of important discussions and initiatives concerning the problems associated with not being fully present ‘in the body’ throughout the day. In case you missed it, MPR will re-broadcast this event on December 6th. Tune in via the web to learn more.

Creativity and Discovery

In addition to wellness initiatives and connecting more fully with ourselves and others, mindfulness practice can have a profound influence on our creative faculties. Just recently I heard a story about an MBA student at our university who arrived at a strategic discovery that could potentially revolutionize marketing. The story goes that this student noticed other students on their smart phones with their heads pointed down as they traversed the hallways of the business school. Like a spark, and without any effort or striving, an idea popped into the student’s mind: marketing advertisements on the floors of the skyway? After all, most of us happen to be looking down, missing advertisements that competitors have carefully placed on the walls!

In my writings, I’ve come to call this form of strategic discovery the Archimedes Effect, an allusion to the non-striving, relaxed form of insight that appears in the story of Archimedes. Hours of careful reflection could not help this brilliant mathematician, whose charge it was to determine whether the King’s crown was made of pure gold. It was only when Archimedes took a hot bath that his mind relaxed and he noticed with great clarity how the water was displaced in a different fashion by objects of greater density. Would it not hold true then, that a crown mixed with silver would have to be larger to displace the same amount of water as one made entirely of gold? Eureka!

Mindfulness and the Common Good

Mindfulness practice not only opens our minds to opportunities for strategic innovation, but it also aids our ability to advance the common good in the present moment. Planning altruistic strategies is just as
important, but too often our minds get stuck in the future and momentary opportunities for compassion lay fallow. Loving kindness is a particular form of meditation that can stimulate authentic acts of kindness in any given moment; most notably, the conscious and genuine act of forgiveness. It is also used to calibrate a less rote and more authentic sense of compassion. You might think of authentic compassion as the difference between briefly feeling sorry for a homeless person and flipping them a coin, versus sincerely opening your heart, wishing them happiness, comfort, and ease of being. This level of compassion can provide the greatest sense of nourishment for the soul. In this way, mindfulness is a particularly helpful practice of connecting deeply with the suffering of others. Through greater awareness we can come to better understand the isolation felt by another by being more aware of the isolation we too feel on a regular basis. Developing this capacity across an entire organization requires that mindfulness becomes a critical component of leadership practice, cultural expectations, team efforts, and learning initiatives. Organizational Consciousness is beneficial in many ways, perhaps most importantly because it may provide “the greatest freedom and potential for creative change” (Heaton & Harung, 1999, p. 159).

The Project for Mindfulness & Contemplative Practices

The wisdom of developing almost any organization is not in attempting to move the heavens but in paying careful attention to how the stars are already aligned. At present, an elegant constellation of mindfulness initiatives has emerged at the University of St Thomas. Each initiative outlined below is intimately connected with President Sullivan’s (2013) request to increase empathy, mindfulness, self-reflection, comfort with ambiguity, imagination, and optimism among students. I am very fortunate to be a member of a group of faculty and staff at the university called the Project for Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices (PMC). This group’s continuous focus is to develop a more mindful university by “Inspiring Awareness, Compassion, and Wholeness in Every Moment.”

To do so, our specific aim is to “Create a safe space for supporting and educating the UST community in meditative and contemplative practices” through specific initiatives. Since it ‘takes a village’, under the outstanding leadership of Dr. Thomas Bushlack, PMC is working diligently to encourage all members of our university to explore ways to help cultivate mindfulness throughout our community. Here are just a few of these initiatives, which in concluding this article, serve as a call to action:

- **Center for Faculty Development:** Faculty Learning Circle on *Meditation & Mindfulness in Teaching*, which meets once monthly to practice meditation and develop strategies for incorporating mindfulness into all aspects of serving UST students. For more information, [click here](#).

- **The Leadership Academy:** March 3rd and 10th Workshop: *Developing a Mindful University*, offered to all staff and faculty interested in leading a culture of mindfulness at UST. Learn more and [register today](#).
• **The Department of Organization Learning & Development:** April 22nd Signature Event titled *Mindfulness at Work*, with special guest speakers: Mariann Johnson & Matthew Sanford. Learn more and register today for this complementary event.

• **The Wellness Center:** Tuesdays from 12 – 12:45, drop in for *Noontime Mindfulness Meditation*, which is also live-streamed so you can practice mindfulness in the comfort of your own office; and inquire about evening *Movement Meditation* sessions with Dr. Uta Wolfe. Click here to learn more.

• **Research on Mindfulness at UST:** Please consider inviting your sophomore and junior level students to participate in upcoming research regarding mindfulness meditation and its impact on test anxiety; email Maryse Abraham at abra9695@stthomas.edu.

• **Institute for Mindful Leadership:** We have been in discussion with the *Institute for Mindful Leadership*, a non-profit founded by Janice Marturano, a former General Mills Vice President, to bring the Institute’s workshops, courses and retreats to St Thomas. The Institute’s curricula combines mindfulness and decades of leadership experience to offer participants an experiential training in cultivating the mind’s innate abilities to focus, see clearly, be more creative and embody compassion. Please contact me if you’d like to learn more: wbrendel@stthomas.edu

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**About the Author**

**Dr. William Brendel** is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Learning and Development at the University of Saint Thomas in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As a scholar-practitioner in the field of Transformative Learning, Dr. Brendel also teaches and consults a variety of aspiring leaders in education and healthcare. Some of his most recent work includes teaching and learning from K-12 educators at the Columbia University Summer Principals Academy, social justice law professors at the Georgetown University Summer Law Institute, healthcare professionals in the Program of Narrative Medicine at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, existential psychotherapists at Memorial Sloane Kettering Hospital, hospice professionals at the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, and disaffected youth leaders at the National School Climate Center. Dr. Brendel also enjoys delivering workshops in a number of international venues, including team development for educators across India and China and most recently US Army Medical Research teams in Africa. You can keep up to date with his latest endeavors at [http://wtbrendel.wordpress.com/](http://wtbrendel.wordpress.com/).
References


