Finding an Inner Voice through Silence: Mindfulness Goes to College

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Abstract

College students are stressed. This is not news. However, the increasing level of stress and anxiety they report is alarming. Added to the traditional pressures to fit in, succeed, and mature, today’s undergraduates are faced with information overload, a sense of isolation, and the cultural shift from the college experience as a time to deepen inner wisdom (discovering a call) to an emphasis on building a resume (finding a job). In this article the author shares the advance of holistic psychology curricula, the practice of integrating mindfulness into higher education, and a shifting personal perspective on undergraduates’ callings.

Stress of Callings

This article focuses on the value of mindful reflection in the undergraduate experience of finding and following a call. Ten years ago I would have written a very different article. I would have suggested encouraging students to spend time discovering their inner voice and unique calling. However, students in my classes have reported feeling confused and stressed when expected to identify a calling. Many students become stressed and anxious, experience feelings of powerlessness, and feel depressed because they do not seem to hear an inner voice or have a sense of their calling. They wonder what is wrong with them if their inner voice is silent. This distant relationship with an inner way of knowing is so prevalent in the students I work with that I suggest it may be normal.

Focusing too strongly on what should be happening takes students out of the present moment. However, present moment awareness creates the environment where students are more likely to hear their own inner voice and possibly a call. Mindfulness meditation can encourage students to let go of the pressure to find and follow a call and can allow present moment awareness to surface thus lessening their level of stress and anxiety. As Sears and Kraus (2009) explained, “Although mindfulness meditation is not goal-oriented in itself, the clarity and acceptance it cultivates may, in turn, increase the likelihood of identifying and pursuing tenable goals and effective pathways to achieve them” (p. 563). Perhaps such “tenable goals” are in fact the beginning whisper of a calling.

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According to Wall (2010) individuals who are successful in finding and following a call have usually been developmentally ready to navigate their way through a disorienting dilemma. The tumultuous nature of students leaving home, being on their own, trying to define themselves and fit in while experiencing more distance from primary support systems creates a disorienting dilemma. This disorientation may lead to additional stress and anxiety and/or it may allow students to see new perspectives, new ways of being. The direction the shift takes often depends on the student's ability to follow their guidance from within. The path to follow guidance from within may be influenced and strengthened by teachers modeling the power of following a calling and supporting the same in their students. This developmental readiness refers to a student's ability to listen to a quiet inner voice over the often loud and confusing external noise from parents, peers, and teachers. Due to the pressures from these external voices, undergraduate developmental readiness to hear and follow a call may be becoming increasingly blocked. Additional factors contributing to this delay in developmental readiness include technological and information overload, and the corporatization of higher education. Factors enhancing developmental readiness, such as engaging in a contemplative practice, may serve to combat the pressures and stress that students' experience.

This essay will address the factors suppressing students' ability to quiet their minds, including information overload and the campus environment. Following this, I discuss the value of contemplative practice, in the form of mindfulness meditation, for helping students to be present in the moment and silence their external stressors. Finally, I offer suggestions for the inclusion of mindful practices in the classroom environment.

**Technology and Information Overload**

College students, like other members of our society, have become distracted, individually and collectively. They are distracted by information overload, the pressures of schoolwork, loans, jobs, and family. They report feeling pressured to find a job, and not just any job but one that has purpose and has called to them. "Stress is a major issue for college students as they grapple with a variety of academic, personal and social pressures" (Forquer, Camden, Gabriau, & Johnson, 2008, p. 564). What if they do not have a sense of what is meant by purpose or calling for them? Does this lack of clarity add to their stress and anxiety?

Transitions to college can be extremely difficult for students because the college environment asks students to reorient their identity and sense of self. This transition takes students out of the comfort zone of their home, family, and friends; and it presents a serious challenge because they are being asked to take responsibility for their own lives—although they may not have achieved the developmental readiness to fully embrace this responsibility. Students are asked to face a situation that is uncomfortable, to make decisions on their own, and to follow their inner voice over the external noise from too much information and the opinions and beliefs of others. This predicament is similar to what Joseph Campbell (2008) referred to as a hero's journey. Following an inner voice is the path of the hero; however, following external messages can lead to a feeling of powerlessness and stress.

In *Data Smog* Shenk (1997) wrote that "In 1971 the average American was targeted by at least 560 daily advertising messages. Twenty years later, that number had risen sixfold, to 300 messages per day" (p. 30), and it has been estimated that one weekday edition of *The New York Times* contains more information than a person in the 17th century would have experienced in a lifetime. As Shenk further stated

When it comes to information, it turns out that one can have too much of a good thing. At a certain level of input, the law of diminishing returns takes effect; the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance. Information overload threatens our ability to educate ourselves, and leaves us vulnerable as consumers and less cohesive as a society. (p. 15)

An antidote to this level of distraction is needed. Developing a contemplative practice might be one such remedy. Having a contemplative practice has been found to lead to physiological coherence. Physiological coherence occurs when various body systems come into balance leading to a reduction in stress and enhanced attention and cognitive ability (Hart, 2004). Physiological coherence might also strengthen students’ connection with their inner voice, and possibly a call. Decreasing stress, increasing attention, and engaging students’ inner voices might result in more meaningful learning along with more satisfying classroom experiences for educators and students alike.

Certainly college is a time to focus on intellectual pursuits and enhancing critical thinking, which is directly related to a student’s ability to handle stress. As Tough (2012) explained, “Pure IQ is stubbornly resistant to improvement after about age eight. But executive functions and the ability to handle stress and manage strong emotions can be improved, sometimes dramatically, well into adolescence and even adulthood” (p. 48). As educators, we should take advantage of this potential by encouraging stress release techniques and practices such as mindfulness. With the direction of higher education moving towards a corporate model, the need to balance finding a job with creating an environment where such contemplative practices are encouraged is increasingly important to help students develop both professionally and personally.

**Knowledge Factories: The Corporatization of Higher Education**

The corporatization of colleges and universities sometimes referred to as the learning-to-earn model of higher education (Nash & Saumman, 1978) complicates the nature of finding and following a call. There is a movement in this country away from colleges and universities as learning organizations (Bok, 2006) towards training facilities or knowledge factories (Aronowitz, 2000). This movement is more than simply a shift from liberal arts to professional studies. This is a change from learning for pursuit of knowledge to learning as training to match the needs of the job market (the learn-to-earn model). It emphasizes finding a job over finding a calling.

**Developmental Readiness and Hearing a Call**

Developmental readiness to hear and follow a call depends on an undergraduate students’ ability to hear and accept their inner voice, their inner authority over the external pressures previously mentioned. In their case study, Popick, Brady, and Whitman (2012) found that “inherent in mindfulness and present-moment awareness is the concept of acceptance” (p. 90). Mindfulness, one example of a contemplative practice, opens the student to experience such present moment awareness through the decreased stress response. Teaching students to balance the ability to engage in strong critical thinking while shifting to present moment awareness, when appropriate, may be the key to developing the necessary readiness to either let go of the need to find a call or allow it to surface and be heard.
Mindfulness Goes to College

In the general population, the positive impact of contemplative practice, such as mindfulness meditation, on relieving stress is well documented (Aftanas & Golosheikine, 2005; Davidson et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008). “Although higher education communities are increasingly implementing programs to address student stress, the lack of rigorous research evaluating their impact has been surprising” (Deckro et al., 2002). Research on contemplative practice and its impact on college students’ lives is, however, on the rise. Studies can readily be found on the physical effects of contemplative practice, general stress relief, improved habits such as sleep, and academic performance (Deckro et al., 2002; Forquer et al., 2008; Grinnell, Greene, Melanson, Blissmer, & Lofgren, 2011; Howell & Euro, 2011; Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008; Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010; Sears & Kraus, 2009).

Colleges and universities are now integrating contemplative practices into their academic communities. According to Zajonc (2003)

One of the most interesting initiatives has been the Academic Program of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. Over the last six years they have worked closely with the American Council on Learned Societies (ACLS) to grant 100 “contemplative fellowships” to full-time faculty to support the development of courses at over eighty institutions ranging from poetry and contemplation at West Point, to contemplating the cosmos at UC Santa Cruz, and contemplative practice and health at the University of Arkansas. (p. 53)

Pedagogical models for introducing contemplative practice into higher education include the following: those based on a specific spiritual or contemplative practice, referred to as spiritually-based, and that have built into the curricula a specific doctrine or philosophy, such as with Transcendental Meditation (Travis & Arenander, 2006); those weaving contemplative practices throughout all coursework to create whole-person learning (Holland, 2006; Palmer, 2004; Sarath, 2006); and those creating on-campus extracurricular activities, such as yoga or mindfulness groups.

Many colleges and universities are meant to provide environments where the biggest questions can be asked and explored. If higher education is heading towards a knowledge factory model as Aronowitz (2000) suggested, then more than ever educators must find ways to engage in holistic approaches that include the integration of contemplative practices in the broadest sense of the concept; or, as Hart (2004) suggested to create approaches “designed to quiet and shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight” (p. 27).

Below is the practice I include in my classes. It allows students to experience present moment awareness, a momentary sense of peace, and brings their attention and focus to the classroom instead of what one student described as “the echo chamber of endless chatter inside my head.”

A Holistic Approach to Healing 101

In 2004, I designed and began teaching A Holistic Approach to Healing, a freshman level undergraduate psychology course at Lesley University. The intent was to encourage students to take responsibility for their health care choices, including diverse (both Western and Eastern) ways of healing. In the first semester there were approximately 25 students in the class. While it was originally planned to be offered only in the fall semester, it is now an introductory course to a relatively new major, holistic psychology, with two sections
offered each semester. Even with this increased offering, there are always students on the waiting lists. What does this tell us about the need for students' desire to understand and integrate holistic healing practices? One essential component of the course is its focus on developing a method of stress release, such as a contemplative practice, to quiet the academic, often judgmental, and chaotic mind. I begin each class with a simple mindfulness practice. Kabat-Zinn (1994) is required reading for the class. To Kabat-Zinn, “mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality” (p. 4).

I intentionally keep the mindfulness exercise short, a minute or two. However, in that short period of time, students are able to experience quieting their minds, sometimes for the first time they can remember. They report a level of relaxation that sets the tone for the rest of their day. It encourages development of a more permanent practice and strengthens students' ability to settle into the present moment and possibly strengthen their inner voice, the voice to follow what matters most to them. Additionally, as mentioned, some students report the decreased stress they experience allows them to focus on the present moment, the course materials and classroom.

I have collected hundreds of holistic assessments from students who have taken this course. In the assessment they are asked to reflect on their overall well-being. Many report increasing anxiety and stress, with no idea what career or path to take or what it means to have a purpose. They question if there is something wrong with them because they do not feel guided towards a larger life calling. In the past, I talked about the importance of finding and following that unique calling. However, such encouragement can create an additional layer of anxiety and stress in a population that is already overwhelmed and struggling with what is “right” for them. Now I help them experience various contemplative practices and encourage them to find one that brings them into present moment awareness. While in present moment awareness, they are able to quiet their most judgmental parts. In the silence it brings, they begin to experience a different way of knowing (their inner voice or authority). Finding and following an inner voice or authority, in spite of external distractions, allows the call to surface. The call does not have to be a huge Hosanna from the universe; it might be a simple whisper.

Conclusion

Undergraduate students are increasingly stressed. They report feeling pressured by parents, peers, and academics to choose majors that support the outer world of employment over their often silenced or marginalized inner voice. This pressure does not always support learning or guidance to find a meaningful career path or calling. I suggest an antidote through contemplative practice. Many students state they cannot meditate: the concept seems foreign and makes them uncomfortable. They struggle with sitting still, visualizing, or practicing other contemplative techniques. Contemplative practice in the classroom need not be limited to popular ways of meditation but can include anything that brings students into present moment awareness. This state of awareness might come through art, music, or walks in nature. Practices that allow students to access their inner voice should be encouraged. There is no one correct way to bring a student's inner voice to the surface. As mentioned, I focus on mindfulness meditation, a practice with which I begin each of my classes. The literature supports its ability to influence the quality of the undergraduate experience including improved academic achievement, enhanced self-acceptance, improved self-care, and overall stress reduction.
We tell our students to pay attention to what we are teaching. However, many of them are too distracted, stressed, and overwhelmed to focus. Helping students find their call is a worthwhile pursuit but not at the expense of creating additional pressure for them. I suggest instead that we introduce them to the present moment where they are more likely to utilize greater cognitive skills and access their own inner teacher. This is when a call might be heard and followed. At the very least, it allows undergraduates to know they have a choice and can experience a sense of calm, if only for a few minutes. It is time to offer contemplative practice a seat in our classrooms because we all, students and faculty alike, can benefit.

References


