

Mindfulness on the frontlines -- Reclaiming human sanity in the midst of torture and terror

When I was a little boy I had a three-legged wooden stool. My father would make me sit on it while he instructed me in mindfulness practice. I had no idea then what I would encounter in my life, or what a precious gift he was giving me.

I have spent years working in the realms of hatred, cruelty and extreme violence. At the same time, I have witnessed at first hand the indomitability of the human spirit. Based on my own experience – and that of accomplished practitioners I have had the honour to work with – I have seen how mindfulness practice has the power to reclaim human sanity in the midst of intense pain, disorientation and fear.

The laboratories where I have found myself putting mindfulness to the test have been places of human illegality, ill-treatment and terror. Many of my interlocutors have been the victims of horrific violence, as well as torturers and killers.

The survivors

My family was introduced to mindfulness practice by a group of survivors. They had returned from years of mass incarceration in the camps for enemy aliens throughout North America where all people of Japanese origin were detained without charge or trial during the Second World War. In the post-war years in Toronto, the painstaking reconstruction of the Japanese community included the building of a small temple they called a "Buddhist Church". Almost all of it was built by hand. My parents and I were the only non-Japanese people there for years. The hall would fall silent after the huge gong rang for meditation; and bit by bit I learned to sit still and stop swinging my legs.

Virtually the only part of the chanting that was in English was a short concluding verse in which we pledged to "labour earnestly for the welfare of all humanity." Looking back now, I can only conclude that those words must have burned themselves deeply into my young consciousness. Perhaps all the moments of sitting awkwardly in mindful silence had prepared the ground for that.

By the time I graduated from university in 1971, the Vietnam War was taking its appalling toll. The nightly news was filled with grotesque images. I began looking for somewhere I could work on the frontlines of peace.

Although the United Nations General Assembly had adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the world's human rights movement was still in its infancy. The phrase "non-governmental organization (NGO)" was largely unknown. Amnesty International was one of the few. I went to London to work in their headquarters and entered the global struggle against political imprisonment and torture, executions and enforced disappearances.

Because of the nature of this work – in which I am still involved – and to protect the identities of people who are defending the victims of these abuses, it is not possible

to disclose in a public journal the locations where the following events took place, give specific time frames, or publish the names of individuals or organizations involved.

The gift

Many years later I was part of an official delegation evaluating the work of a major international organization working to protect the victims of war. I was taken by a medical doctor to visit a secret government facility where detainees were held illegally for interrogation by the armed forces. We went into a cement block near the entrance where, once the interrogators were finished with them, the detainees were handed over to civil police authorities for release back into the community.

The doctor spoke to the officer in charge and asked to see a man who was in custody in that grey zone between the military and the police. After some time, he was brought in. He had just been tortured.

We sat down with him in silence on the cement floor. The doctor clearly knew who he was but waited a long time before asking what had happened. It was obvious that this man was not in good shape. After some time he slowly gave us a few details of what he had just been through. At one point he said, "They told me they had my wife and child. If I didn't confess, they said they would kill them. I could hear them screaming in the next room."

"That's not possible," said the doctor. "Your wife and child have been safe in my home with me all this time."

He turned towards me, a man lost in utter bewilderment, fear and personal disintegration. He was trapped between two completely contradictory realities, having no way of knowing what to believe – incapable of choosing between the screams he had heard in the nightmare of his torture, or the words of the doctor sitting on the cement in front of him.

I was at a complete loss too. I did not know this man. I had met the doctor only that morning. I knew none of the details. I was left without any idea what to think or say as this tortured being stared at me, silently screaming for help.

Then, somehow, in the midst of that horror and hopelessness, it occurred to me that there was only one thing I could try. I had no idea what effect it might have. I straightened my back as best I could and tried to relax my crossed ankles on the cement. I slightly lowered my gaze and began falteringly following my breath.

I had heard somewhere that it is in the bare encounter with open space that we connect with the sanity we are born with.

At some point, he started to move. I looked up. His entire demeanour had changed. He had made his way back from delirium.

He fumbled inside his clothing, took out a crumpled little photo and handed it to me. It was his child.

For a while I cupped the picture, like a little being, in my hands. Then slowly I leaned forward and returned it to him, like a gift.