
Introduction

In the spring of 2013, we, Kirsten and Valerie, were leading a workshop for school leaders at a beautiful retreat center outside of Boston. On this particular day, the sun was shining; daffodils were blooming; the sky was blue; and overhead, it was nearly cloudless. In the early afternoon as we were strolling outside on a break, we suddenly and unexpectedly received word that a horrific and terrible bombing had just occurred at the finish line of the Boston Marathon only a few miles away. The Boston Marathon, always held on Patriots' Day, is traditionally a day of celebration and civic pride in Boston, a day filled with families on the streets cheering other family members and friends—everyone is friends!—shouting out and supporting each other all along the race route as participants run for heroic causes and sometimes show superhuman efforts to finish the race. The tragic events of April 15, 2013, transformed this sunny day. At the retreat center, uncertainty, anxiety, and a sense of fear spread throughout the classroom as participants scurried to their devices to check on news and loved ones and to respond to messages of concern. The conference environment was, understandably, torn and shattered. We all wondered what to do. Adjourn the conference? Break for the day? Sit together watching the news and the emerging reports on our laptops and iPads?

Because this was a workshop on mindfulness for school leaders—many of the participants had come to describe the mindfulness practices they brought to their school and academic settings, and the effect these practices had on learning and leadership—someone suggested we sit together and begin a loving-kindness meditation. Loving-kindness meditations can help evoke compassion and friendliness toward oneself and others, and are central practices for those who wish to increase their capacity to feel love for tenderness, kindness, and a sense of generosity toward oneself and others. The loving-kindness

meditation is about “planting the seeds of loving wishes over and over in our hearts,” as described by the acclaimed mindfulness teacher Jack Kornfield. This meditation often begins with an embrace of oneself, moving outward to imagining love and compassion for others and the world.¹ This meditation seemed especially appropriate at this moment of fear and uncertainty, a moment when so many were filled with a sense of the unknown and potential danger. (We personally had a friend, a young physician-in-training, who had volunteered to work in the medical tent at the finish line that day. We were unable to get in touch with him at that moment because cell phone signals were jammed and overwhelmed.)

Committed to a new course of action, we gathered our group together and explained our plan. Without much discussion a wave of quiet moved over the group. We sat in a circle, and began to breathe gently, reciting the words, “May I be filled with loving-kindness.” We stilled our bodies (which was difficult to do at that moment) and, beginning with deep, rhythmic breathing, tried to listen to our beating hearts and to be compassionate toward ourselves in this fearful moment. Slowly, with a sense of easing in the area around our hearts and chests, we moved to picturing someone or something we loved—a child, a dog, a grandmother or grandfather we felt especially close to—evoking a visual image of this person smiling at us and filled with love. We said the words quietly to ourselves, “May she be filled with loving-kindness, may she be safe from outer dangers . . .” Gradually, encouraging our bodies to relax and our minds to quiet, and easing into the gentle in and out of our inhalation and exhalation, we moved to picturing all the people at the Boston Marathon finish line site, where so much chaos and trauma was occurring at that moment. “May they find safety. May they not be too afraid. May they get the medical and spiritual help they need. May their helpers know what to do.” We envisioned all the spectators on the sidelines, and the wider world, hearing this news of the bombings, and breathed into the idea that eventually individuals might find a way to make sense of this event, and to heal. “May they also find the help they need. May they find the psychological support they need. May we find a way of understanding this. May we find a way of healing this.” Finally we came back to ourselves, once again wishing compassion for ourselves in our fear, and exhaling a sense of calm into the room and over each other. “May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be filled with understanding and compassion. May my sense of peace extend outward to the world.”

Because we have a preference for visual meditations, we pictured a circle of energy, beginning in our breath and moving toward the

finish line of the marathon, finally moving outward across the world. As we together imagined not only the intense scene at the finish line, the scene of mayhem and chaos and blood, we were also imagining peace, connection, and the possibility of forgiveness amid the terrible tragedies of that day. Our meditation was a way of finding meaning around this event, creating peacefulness and connectedness in ourselves, and trying to do some good in the world while we sat in our small circle. The next day we talked about what we had noticed during the meditation. Many of us observed that we emerged from the circle feeling more grounded, more connected to ourselves, and more able to move forward into the grueling week that was to come, during which some of the attendees would be dealing with the tragic deaths that had occurred within their own school communities and neighborhoods.²

The School Leader's Dilemma

Our schools—and the larger world in which we and our pupils navigate—grow increasingly complex and unpredictable. Buffeted by global happenings, and the speed and pace at which we operate in school as information and connection are increasingly available at every moment, our leadership selves can be sorely tested and profoundly challenged. Not only are our leadership selves asked to grow bigger by sometimes tragic external events like the marathon bombings, but the complexity of our leadership environments and accountability systems, and the new *turned-on-ness* of our reality in which we are expected to respond to this complexity almost immediately, challenges us intellectually and spiritually in ways that are unprecedented in human life. This complexity, immediacy, overabundance of information, and potential for distraction has consequences for everyone, but we feel perhaps most particularly for school leaders, because they must lead and show the way forward during a period in which the education sector is undergoing transformational and truly groundbreaking change. In our view, the parameters of the learning sector are profoundly transforming: How we define learning is dramatically shifting, when and where learning may occur is being redefined, and the ways in which educational systems should respond to these shifts are all profound and pressing questions. Readers of this book know and feel this complexity every day. As a recent informal study by Jerry Murphy, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, reveals,³ school leaders experience professional stress at

extraordinarily high rates, and in myriad ways. At a professional development meeting convened by Murphy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a group of school leaders reported that

- 89% felt overwhelmed;
- 84% neglected to take care of themselves in the midst of stress; and
- 80% scolded themselves when they performed less than perfectly—conditions under which few of us are primed to feel our best or do our best work.

How are educational leaders expected to reflect and renew, and avoid the “sacrifice syndrome” that spirals leaders downward into coping and putting up with, rather than devising creative solutions to, the problems that beset their buildings, their districts, and their organizations?⁴ Can the practices of mindfulness positively affect the learning environments in which school leaders operate? What does mindfulness help us do, at an individual and organizational level? How can the “soft” practices of mindfulness increase our leadership effectiveness, our capacity to grow our educational programs and the individuals within them, to achieve the results demanded by our accountability environments and ourselves? These are the questions we explore in this book through the following chapters, with portraits of practice from the leaders with whom we work, and with stories from our own lives as mindfulness practitioners.

This Book Is for Educational Leaders

The effectiveness of mindfulness practices on students and teachers has been demonstrated now by hundreds of empirical studies (only some of which are featured in this book) and supported by many organizations that specialize in helping teachers and students bring mindfulness practices to the classroom and other learning environments. But we feel school leaders themselves, in their daily leadership lives, are underserved.

Our several decades of work with school leaders, as organizational consultants, researchers, retreat leaders, and leadership coaches, suggest that our clients—those trying to lead wildly shifting organizations in the midst of profound cultural and technological change—are extraordinarily stressed and frequently lack resources and supports for building and nurturing their own leadership practices.

Often the leaders we work with feel unauthorized even to consider what *they* might need to be the leaders they feel they should be during challenging times. (“It’s selfish, and self-indulgent to think about me,” they tell us, and we understand why they feel this way.) But we also observe that after years of habitual stress and pedal-to-the-metal coping, their leadership decisions often suffer. Former high performers find themselves slipping into simply maintaining the status quo, or coping day to day and hoping that external events will bring a change.

Ironically, we believe that difficulty, stress, and even crisis are invitations to grow, to expand our ways of understanding ourselves and our habitual reactions. Through body attunement practices, contemplation exercises, and other kinds of integrative practices we outline in this book, we believe leaders can learn some of the fundamental building blocks of sustainable and coherent mindful leadership, and use these tools to reboot themselves on the job, enjoy their leadership lives more, and lead more boldly and with more support from others around them and within themselves. We are honored to begin this journey with you.

Who We Are—Mindfully

We, Kirsten and Valerie, met many years ago while training at the Center for Courage & Renewal with Parker J. Palmer and his team. For several decades, philosopher and educator Palmer, and an inspiring group of collaborators, have created uniquely contemplative, thoughtful, transforming retreats in which leaders can contemplate the challenges and paradoxes of leadership in the 21st century. We engaged in this training to learn how to create spaces in which a leader’s true values, soul, and inner teacher might emerge, and of course to deepen our own practices and self understandings. Among many other things, we learned facilitation techniques that put a high premium on self-disclosure, self-reflection, and vulnerability. So although we tell you more about our training and the experiences we’ve had throughout the book, here is a brief introduction to our mindfulness stories, as educators and leaders ourselves. We want you to understand how our own mindfulness practices arose not out of special knowledge, particular insights, or “gifts from the East” but in response to real professional and personal challenges in our own lives. We notice a pattern in the lives of those we’ve had the privilege to coach and teach: that we are opened to

these practices through difficulty, often through failure, trauma, and disappointment with the ways we have chosen to live our lives. Our stories tell the same narrative.

Kirsten Olson

Fifteen years ago, I attended a workshop and retreat sponsored by the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, New York, taught by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the pioneering mindfulness-based stress-reduction trainer and physician mentioned in Chapter 1, pages 19, 21. The retreat was held in a windowless hotel ballroom set up banquet style, which swallowed up the attendees and gave us all a weary, ghoulish look even though it was only 10 in the morning. Although Kabat-Zinn already was well known in many alternative medicine circles and in pain research, at that time, he was just beginning to take his emerging ideas—that meditation should not be confined to the cushion—to a broad public. Emerging clinical studies made it clear that mindfulness meditation might have revolutionary healing and well-being implications for medicine and other health and wellness endeavors, and popular interest in stress reduction was growing.

At this retreat, doctors, nurses and other health care professionals gathered, as did alternative healers, longtime meditators, and people like me, in attendance for much more prosaic personal reasons. I decided to attend this retreat because I was looking for a break from my life, and I heard from a respected friend that this Omega retreat might offer something restful, peaceful, and intriguing on an autumn weekend. I longed for some silence and peacefulness, and the idea of simply being in a hotel room by myself felt like a retreat and a vacation. This was a particularly challenging period in my life. My 15-year marriage was coming to an end, and I was in the midst of completing a doctorate in a highly competitive graduate school program that required extensive commuting. I was the mother of four young children. Lying in an already-made bed, with an opportunity to raid the minibar, seemed an alluring and exotic part of the retreat.

Chomping on M&M's from the minibar and considering the last several years of my life, in many ways so blessed and in many ways also so rushed and too full, I felt roiling anxiety about my precarious financial future and my unknown professional life, and tremendous concern about my capacity to support these children and be the mother, teacher, and leader I wished to be. Most of all, I noticed the pace I was keeping: sleeping only three to four hours a night, composing constant

and punishing to-do lists, feeling pervaded by a constant sense of never having done enough. This sense of incompleteness and falling behind was accompanied by withering internal self-criticism (my inner critic was a medieval executioner, as well as the sternest academic ever!). From the outside, I appeared to be coping well and keeping up with an overabundant number of commitments—in fact, I took great pride in being “remarkable!” and resilient. Inside, of course, I was in turmoil: The rising tide of self-criticism and the lack of self-compassion would drive me to new heights of achievement, and I found it difficult to ask for help or to find people to whom I could really open up. After all, wasn’t I the one coping so well? Stepping off my pedestal of strength and perfection felt very threatening, even inconceivable, yet keeping myself there sometimes required more effort than I could muster. Like many people around me, I was exhausted and overwhelmed, inside and out. But I took great pride in not showing it.

Kabat-Zinn began the retreat by asking us to create a circle of chairs and the quiet ring of a bell. He spoke a little about his own journey through mindfulness and meditation, an abundantly documented story that he recounts in a beautiful interview you can listen to on Sounds True.⁵ With an earnest commitment to laying aside my academic skepticism, I listened to Jon attentively, openly, and incomprehendingly; at a deeper level, I hardly understood a word of what he was saying. Then he began to lead us through a body scan (described in this book in Chapter 2, page 62). As it happened, the room where we were doing this exploration and body scan was directly adjacent to a kitchen, and there was loud pop music playing as the kitchen staff moved into full gear to prepare lunch for the retreat’s hungry visitors. As we began to quiet ourselves and focus on our feet, beginning to move up through the various places in our bodies, suddenly, someone in the kitchen dropped a pile of lunch plates and silverware, and shouted, “*Oh shit!* Goddammit to hell!” Jon gently looked up at us, smiled quietly, and said, “Everything that comes to us is part of the meditation, part of life. Enjoy all the sights and sounds the world presents to you as you meditate and know that perfect silence and stillness is not required.”

My journey with mindfulness began with that cursing. Through the years of building a mindfulness practice, and many other forms of complementary training including a vigorous daily yoga practice, frequent Beauty Baths (see Mindfulness Practice Aid 2.4, “The Beauty Bath,” in Chapter 2, page 65), and mindful walking, talking, and listening (listening perhaps most of all), I am constantly relearning that perfect silence and the ideal conditions for mindfulness are not required

for contemplative practice. I find that looking up at the sky; closely observing leaves on trees; engaging in a hot, sweaty yoga routine; and deeply joining with my clients by listening to them, are gifts of mindfulness to myself, and help attune me to my own needs and feelings, so I am more available for others. Since those early days, all the practices described in this book have helped me become more myself everyday: less frantic, more able to be realistic and truthful, and more attentive to moments of *alrightness* and the sacred and pleasurable gifts of being alive. These practices help bring me back to myself when I am far away.

We want the same for others, which is why we wrote this book.

Valerie Brown

When I passed the New Jersey bar exam in 1983, I had no intention of practicing mindfulness. Back then, I was mindful of very little, except my determination to get a job, make money, and get out of Brooklyn, which was at that time very much a ghetto. I actually began practicing mindfulness years later, in 1991, when, by chance, I drove past a storefront in my new neighborhood. The sign read: Meditation and Mindfulness.

I was at a low point. I was going through a divorce, ending a marriage that had lasted a very short and tumultuous year. My former husband said he wanted a divorce because I never listened to him. And he was right. The big-shot lawyer, the expert, I had it all figured out, and I didn't have time to listen anyway. The split left me looking for a place to live, and facing surgery. I was convinced that all this emotional turmoil had contributed to the stress I felt and to my getting sick. A classic type A personality, I was always moving fast. I drove fast; I parked my car headlights facing out for a quick getaway. I talked fast, I walked fast, and my thinking was fast, too.

The unexpected surgery brought all that fast talking, fast walking, and fast driving to an abrupt halt, and I found myself laid up, barely able to walk for weeks. It wasn't pretty. Several months after my divorce and the surgery, I decided I needed a vacation and went hiking in the mountains of northern New Mexico, a place I felt deeply connected. When I reached the top of a high mountain, at a clearing in the woods, I sat on a log and looked up at the sky. I watched as the clouds inched along, fascinated by this slow-motion dance. I had been so disconnected from nature, so rushed and hurried in my daily life, that I had forgotten to look up at the sky; I hadn't done so in months, maybe years. I had forgotten that clouds move. I realized then how disconnected I was from the natural world around me, and from myself.

I had missed so much. This was an important moment of recognition, a turning point.

I left New Mexico with a new passion to understand myself and regain a sense of balance in my life. Out of this experience, I learned an important lesson about mindfulness: Mindfulness is about being present, showing up for one's self and for others, for life. I could not mentally think my way over the walls I had created. I had to find another way around the wall, or disassemble it brick by brick.

I went back to that storefront for the first night of a meditation class, an event that stays with me even now. The instruction that night was simple: "Let go of thoughts as they arise. See them like clouds floating in the sky." I wrestled with myself through the experience of meditation. My mind raced nearly out of control, feeling like it was going to crash and burn. I noticed that my back hurt, and I felt a strange ache behind my knees. I felt sleepy. I wanted gum. The whole thing tormented me, and I wondered when it would end. Finally, after two hours, the bell rang and the meditation ended. It felt like a disaster. But I came back the next week to try to get it right. And I have been coming back to Monday night meditation for almost two decades, learning ways of extending mindfulness into my daily life.

Little did I know that the year of crisis, watching the clouds move on that day on the top of a mountain, and that night of trying out meditation would set me on a new course, a new direction. I was learning, the hard way, the art of stopping, a fundamental practice of meditation and mindfulness. I became a lawyer as a way to escape poverty and the damage of childhood: the broken home, a life of penny pinching, scrimping, and saving every dime. Paradoxically, as my mindfulness practice grew steadier, I began to recognize just how out of control I was: my fear, my anger, running—always on the run—the hiding. I attended a daylong retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and Master of Zen meditation, at the Riverside Church in Manhattan. Instinctively, I knew I had gotten lucky yet again and had met someone very special, who would have a profound impact on me. Nhat Hanh's words were so simple and yet so profound. He talked about feeling alive in this moment, about recognizing what is happening right now: that I am breathing, that I am sitting here, my sense of well-being. This was radical for me. So much of my life as a lawyer-lobbyist was about the mental satisfaction of ticking off the next thing on my to-do list, only to have it replaced with yet another thing. My high-powered career had left me with little time even to recognize my own breath. Since that first retreat with Nhat Hanh, I have trained myself to do just one thing at a time.

When I eat a meal, I don't read or talk on the phone. When I cook at home, I don't watch TV. When I talk with someone on the phone, I just talk on the phone.

Remembering to live in mindfulness is not a once-and-done proposition; it is about recommitting myself every day and every hour of every day. My life now is very different from the one I lived with my all-consuming lawyer-lobbyist job. Today, working as a leadership coach and educational consultant, I create the life I want, at a human scale and at a human pace. I still struggle with days when I am overly busy, moving from project to project. I sometimes find it difficult to say "no" to a new project. I coax myself into asking for help from others, and not just offering help. I notice the impulse to hide my true self from others, recognizing this familiar pattern, its origin and purpose. Being mindful creates a kind of internal space that allows me to hold these difficult feelings and thoughts, and to feel deep appreciation and compassion for my personal journey, a journey that is not unlike the journeys traveled by the many people you will encounter in this book.

Benefits of Mindfulness—To the Leader (and Your Team)

If you're wondering what mindfulness can do for *you*, consider some of the benefits of engaging in a regular mindfulness practice based on our experiences of working with many educational leaders.

- **Improved ability to notice and slow down, or stop, automatic reactions.** In the highly stressful, 12- to 14-hour-a-day leadership cycles most school leaders face, many educational leaders fall into habitual patterns of behavior, in part simply because they have too little time to reflect on these patterns. One person we recently interviewed for this book said, "I used to be late and arrive stressed to nearly every meeting. Working with a coach who is also a mindfulness practitioner, I developed an explicit 'pause' practice three to four times a day, where I regrouped and then spent a little time looking at my schedule in my office and breathing. At first this felt incredibly weird, but now I count on it and it's almost become automatic. I am now coming to meetings much calmer and more focused. This means I can notice what's going on in meetings better, and I think our team tends to make better decisions and waste less time. That helps everyone, not just

me. And everyone also spends less time tangled up with me, and dealing with my issues!”

- **Increased capacity to respond to complex and difficult situations.** A West Coast superintendent described being tangled in ongoing power skirmishes between a prominent union member and a few school board leaders. “This conflict was sapping everyone’s energy and focus. After I began a morning practice of ‘Count Your Blessings Pause, Dwell in Your Victories, and Show Up as Your Bigger Self (CVS)’ [see Mindfulness Practice Aid 7.2 in Chapter 7, page 199], I found myself much less activated by the maneuvering and tension. Increasingly, I felt that I could choose whether or not to get involved, and how. Finally, I was able to name the power struggle as a source of dysfunction, face to face between the two parties—which took a lot of courage for me. Oddly, the parties involved started to take more responsibility for their behavior. I never would have predicted that.” Mindfulness practices actually helped this superintendent bravely face up to an ongoing leadership dysfunction and pivot the parties into taking greater responsibility for it themselves. “I had to feel pretty grounded in myself to do this. My CVS practice [see Mindfulness Practice Aid 7.2, page 199] helped me show up as my bigger self, just like it says.”
- **Ability to see situations more clearly, or many dimensions of a situation.** An executive director of a charter school in the Northeast told us, “We were constantly struggling with teacher turnover at our charter school. Whole groups of teachers would leave every year, which dramatically affected our learning climate and performance results. I felt frantic every spring, and would actually feel like I was having panic attacks driving to school in the morning. A friend recommended that I try some breathing practices, which I read about through Dr. Andrew Weil’s website. Through the breathing, and practicing it when I was driving, I was able to slow down a little and begin thinking about what I was modeling. I began to ask myself, ‘Is what we are asking people to do really a sustainable pace? Is it a sustainable leadership pace for me?’” That pace question, and the breath practice, actually began to change things for this leader, and for her school culture. Ultimately, teacher turnover began to drop—remarkable given such a small intervention.
- **Becoming more creative at designing solutions to complex dilemmas.** As we’ve said, many of our clients come to

mindfulness through a difficult event: a pitched public battle over an educational issue that spills into the media, a staff crisis, or a divorce or an event with a child or family member that is so disturbing or shaking that they are moved to explore new kinds of healing and comfort. As one leader in the midst of a divorce told us, “The intensity of that situation, the difficulties I was having in accepting feelings and being present to difficult emotions at that time made me need to find something.” He began a yoga practice, which eventually led him to a regular meditation practice, and now he teaches a course on mindful communication in addition to his educational leadership duties. “It has transformed my life, and now I teach these practices to others. At a moment when I thought my life had come to an end, that was when my life really began.”

- **Ability to achieve balance and greater resilience at work and at home.** Many of the individuals we work with are eager, sometimes desperate, to find ways to feel more grounded and less distracted, given the demands of work, family, and personal life. Not enough time for career development, children, spouses, personal renewal, professional reading, and hobbies is an omnipresent dilemma. We have found, through working with hundreds of people, however, that pausing even for a few moments a day to stop and quiet oneself—to relax the nervous system, body, and mind, can reduce feelings of stress and the sense of time famine and not enough of “you.” Paradoxically, this sometimes creates more time, more energy, a sense of greater resources. As one principal told us, “I used to believe that time completely ran me. Now I see much more that I am in charge of my time, that I’m more in control than I think I am. I also feel much clearer about what I can give up, so as not to get so hijacked during the day and to enjoy the moments I am with my kids, my husband.” Even just the stopping to observe a thing of beauty (in our practice we call this taking a Beauty Bath, described in Mindfulness Practice Aid 2.4 in Chapter 2, page 65) can offer powerful benefits, and our clients are often surprised that these small events can make them happier and more contented, less frenzied and more balanced. “I’ve discovered that it’s really small little practices in the day that have changed my perceptions and made me a more effective leader. Who knew? They sure didn’t teach you this in graduate school,” said the same principal.

Every chapter of our book discusses practical day-to-day mindful leadership applications and includes mindful practice exercises. We explain how to engage in each practice, and describe the exercises sequentially so that you can start with a most basic practice and progress if you wish. (Please remember that these practices take time, and the shifts are usually subtle . . . so hang with us.)

One special education program leader concluded her story around her journey into mindfulness and other contemplative practices in this way: “Personally, I meditate twice a day. I do a morning meditation and an evening meditation—perhaps a loving-kindness meditation in the evening and calming my breath in the morning. I spend about 20 minutes doing each meditation, but I don’t set an alarm anymore; I can just manage it. I have found that in my own life, through a recent divorce, breast cancer, and having a special needs child of my own, I’ve been able to stay much more calm. I’m not as reactive, I do much less ruminating, I’m more resilient. People say to me, ‘You really help us stay grounded,’ and I attribute that to my practice,” she told us. “I also find that mindfulness training helps my teachers and me be more in touch with our bodies, be more engaged in work, to trust ourselves. It changes everything. I think mindfulness training changes the world. It changed my world.”

We believe mindfulness practices really do change the world, for educational leaders, their learning organization, and eventually all communities around them. In the next chapters, we invite you to come on this exploration of mindfulness practices with us to see how real school leaders are incorporating these practices into their leadership lives.

We also invite you to please come check in with us at [Facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader](https://www.facebook.com/TheMindfulSchoolLeader) to

- share your own mindful leadership story,
- get valuable advice and resources from the authors and other educational leaders, and
- create a community of practitioners who share their practices for creating more coherent and gratifying professional and personal lives.



Additional materials and resources related to *The Mindful School Leader: Practices to Transform Your Leadership and School* can be found at Resources.corwin.com/BrownMindfulLeader