A WORLD WITH SPACE FOR ALL TO BE

Generative mindfulness, awareness-based action research, and inclusion

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As a team of three co-authors with diverse positionality, we have a simple vision: Human beings can live with awareness of our interconnectedness across artificial dividing lines of gender, race, and the other ways we box ourselves in, so as a whole we create community and live together in societies that sustain the vitality of our planet for future generations. We evoke this future, grounding our vision by describing how we each have worked to bring it alive. Our hope is that readers will be inspired to listen to what calls them to act, so they may create the seemingly impossible future of which they dream.

In a world where so many doubt the future of the planet, in which it seems that the more contact humans have with one another across ethnic and national boundaries, the more fear and hostility is manifested, the three of us sense grounds for hope and even excitement. In this chapter, we describe briefly how generative mindfulness nourishes forms of leadership and engagement that yield possibilities for an inclusive society, one in which people appreciate the rich diversity of human traditions and cultures and find ways to breathe through any initial fear and aggression elicited by those differences.

We see spiritual cultivation, systems awareness, and community and organizational resilience as fundamental for the future of humanity and the planet:

- **Spiritual cultivation**: seeing the sacredness of life in oneself and all beings,
- **Systems awareness**: sensing and understanding the complex and intricate interactions and interdependence of actions within any living, dynamic system, and
- **Community and organizational resilience**: co-creating healthy cultures.

A vital, inclusive future depends on leaders who are aware of themselves, their interdependence, and their impacts. (For more detail on creating such healthy societies, see Goldman Schuyler et al., 2016, 2021; Watson, 2021a; Wilson, 2019).

Wisdom traditions in many cultures bring their own approaches to spiritual cultivation (for example, see Nelson, 2016; Norris, 2007; Spiller, 2021). Here we focus on generative
mindfulness (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2021) as a foundation for creating inclusive societies. Recognized widely by mental health practitioners, educators, and business leaders as key to well-being (Badham & King, 2021; Dahl et al., 2020; Reitz et al., 2020), at its simplest mindfulness means training the mind to focus in the present, thereby lessening its natural tendency to be distracted by whatever is happening. This reduces the mind’s urge to jump from one thing to another and get drawn into worry or anticipation. Although the term comes from centuries of use across varied Buddhist traditions that define it in different ways (Dunne, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2011), mindfulness has recently been applied in psychotherapy and business settings mainly as a set of tools to quiet the mind so as to manage stress and enhance performance (Creswell, 2017; Good et al., 2016; Purser et al., 2018). We invite readers to consider learning about the subtler and more profound understandings offered by generative mindfulness as a deepening of basic mindfulness: cultivating the human capacity to be present to ourselves and our social worlds with a receptive yet engaged mind and an open heart. Such mindfulness is not so easy to bring to daily life and tends to require committed practice over time!

Action research is a participatory approach to organizational and community change through systems awareness. Action research emerged in the 1940s through the work of Kurt Lewin at MIT (Wilson, 2019). Used by academics and social change agents alike, action research emphasizes group process, relationship, collaborative action, and learning from action—working with people. The researcher/practitioner fosters a collective learning process of action and reflection for enacting change. Donald Schön (1983) opened the door to what he called triple loop learning, the capacity to reflect on one’s own interior state of being—the condition of the self, the being that one experiences while doing. Triple loop learning goes beyond the reach of language to what Gregory Bateson (1972) called “spiritual knowing” and Otto Scharmer (2018) calls “presencing.” Richard Nielsen (1993) brought triple loop learning powerfully into the understanding of community change in varied cultures in ways that human beings might build on, given the inter-cultural conflicts we face today. Otto Scharmer and Karin Kaeufer (2015) introduced the term “awareness-based action research” to reflect the integration of nous: spiritual knowing and self-awareness. Arawana Hayashi and Ricardo Goncalves (2021) and others have integrated embodied ways of knowing, including movement and artistic expression.

Inclusion is essential for community and organization development and can be defined as the practice of providing everyone with equal access to opportunities and resources in ways that ensure that they feel a sense of belonging and support from the organization (Watson, 2021b). While diversity is the presence of differences within an organization or workplace and can refer to differences in race, ethnicity, gender, or any number of things, inclusion focuses on giving traditionally marginalized groups (like those based on gender, race, and physical or mental disabilities) the means for them to be equal (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2021). At its highest level, an inclusive society is one where people feel they belong and have a voice and are provided with legitimate ways to participate. To fully define inclusion, we choose to draw upon Michael Pirson’s (2019) writings on human dignity: viewing “dignity as an inherent attribute of human beings”—and meaning all human beings, not just those of particular social strata, ethnicities, or cultures (p. 42).

Each member of the author team discusses these concepts by presenting their experience bringing them to life. Kathryn Goldman Schuyler shares her thoughts and experience with generative mindfulness and how it nourishes vitality and connection with others. Patricia Wilson describes how she has worked with community engagement in the global south using awareness-based action research. Lemuel Watson discusses his work creating an anti-racist agenda at a large American university, suggesting how both one’s way of being and the policies created for organizations are equally essential for shifting social systems.
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Kathryn: Generative mindfulness

By generative mindfulness, I mean mindfulness practice that opens us to a sense of being alive—in connection with ourselves, other beings, and everything alive around me. It is a way to recognize how amazing it is to be a human being. Mindfulness becomes generative when it is part of daily work life in ways that support people in being present to themselves, their work, and one another while nourished by their own culture’s spiritual traditions.

I grew intrigued by Tibetan Buddhist approaches to meditation largely because of what I sensed to be their precision and depth as a “technology for transformation”: a way of creating a completely different mindset from what I experienced growing up in New York and America in the 1950s and 1960s. Although I appreciate what our bustling society contributes to the world, I have long felt a yearning for a society where people sense their interconnectedness, both with one another and with the natural world. I’ve brought awareness practices into the curriculum at five universities, as to me this seems core to developing as a professional, and students seem to see the value of this approach. I began using the term mindfulness because it was becoming widely known. 3 While it is valuable as a method for handling stress and thereby improving performance at work, I am most intrigued by seeing it as a way to become wise and free—which has long been what it offers: a chance of waking up.

Language as a way to sense possibilities

As a language, classical Tibetan has words for concepts which open an entirely different view of the world and what is possible in life. For example, it is “normal” to speak of enlightened beings: ordinary people like us who, through practice, attain wisdom about life.4 Taming or training the mind doesn’t mean learning new subject matters; it refers to learning how to settle the mind so it habitually is less reactive. And, as the Dalai Lama explained in Ethics for the New Millennium (1999), what determines the ethical value of an action is a person’s kun long.

Translated literally, the participle kun means “thoroughly” or “from the depths,” and long denotes the act of causing something to stand up, arise, or to awaken. … It therefore denotes the individual’s overall state of heart and mind. When this is wholesome, it follows that our actions themselves will be (ethically) wholesome.

(p. 30)

I was drawn to learn about Buddhist practice and its wisdom traditions because as I read the Dalai Lama’s book on ethics and watched how he interacted with people, I sensed something that was not just inhering in him, in one extraordinary person, but a process of cultivating aspects of being human that we in “modern” Western society were not attending to. I suspect that many of us, in different cultures around the world, sense varied versions of what I felt: a hunger for a kind of nourishment from the society around us that we didn’t feel as children, and that this draws us toward finding others with similar senses of what is possible that we might co-create together.

“Waking Up Moments” as a pathway toward a healthy community culture

The research I’ve co-created over the past decade shows how these aspirations can be given form and made more concrete. Noticing that sometimes one could experience moments that I called “waking up,” when we feel that the invisible scrim between us and life dissolves and we are more alive or more present, I wanted to see whether I could form a collaborative
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group to explore this experience, learn from what we did together during this project, and
publish our research in a journal for others to learn from. At the stage where humans are now
globally, some type of action research seems essential if we as a species are going to amplify
positive change and learn from one another. The members of that authoring team intention-
ally did not simply “do” change processes or personal practice, but from the start incorporated
research elements so we might influence others’ thought and action.

This initial insight (that waking up happens in moments) led to several years of supporting a
small group of people around the world in noticing and taking notes on their own first-person
experiences of such moments (Goldman Schuyler et al., 2017). This led to a second phase
in which I consulted to the leader of a large university HR department who was intrigued
by the idea that one could transform oneself in this way. Having read the various authors’
personal experiences in my book *Inner Peace—Global Impact: Tibetan Buddhism, Leadership, and
Work* (2012), she used these suggestions to shift her own struggles in a new leadership posi-
tion into a sense of ease and comfort—and asked me to help her bring “mindfulness and joy”
to those members of her department who wished to give it a try (Goldman Schuyler et al.,
2018). Wanting to encourage young professionals in researching this approach to mindfulness,
I brought two doctoral students into this project, both of whom completed action research
dissertations about it, with one incorporating this in her teaching in Latin America (Cortés
Urrutia, 2016; Wolberger, 2018).

As to the outcomes: the climate of the organization changed distinctly, as people who
had initially felt they couldn’t possibly “do this” (meditate and have it feel comfortable and
useful in relation to work) began to experiment, since they were encouraged to try it but not
compelled to do anything at all in particular. They were invited simply to explore noticing
what the leader decided to describe as “mindful moments” and if they wished, to talk about
their own approach at the monthly directors’ meeting. The leader’s way of grounding such
practices in her own experience and speaking directly about this were key factors for success,
as was the way that she incorporated this into management meetings, rather than holding it to
be a training process or side initiative. This is what is often lacking in introductions of mind-
fulness in the workplace: How one shows up at work as a human being and the integration of
awareness into the process of management are critical for the future.

The next phase will be an exploration of what can happen when a group of people who
work together who have been practicing meditation or mindfulness individually opt to apply
this to sensing the field they create together. Otto Scharmer, Peter Senge, and others have been
developing and exploring the notion of social fields: “the relational and felt dimensions of our
social systems” (Hayashi & Goncalves, 2021, p. 37) or “the invisible relational quality” of the
social space (Hayashi & Goncalves, 2021, p. 42). What happens when people reflect together
on what they generate together: when they not only attempt to create a healthy workplace or
community culture, but they also attune themselves to one another, whether through formal
mindfulness practices or informal ones like dancing or making music together, and then make
themselves conscious of the shifts in this shared energy—the social field?

This is what Patricia Wilson has been exploring in her community engagement work, as
she will next describe.

**Patricia: Awareness-based action research and community engagement**

My own learning journey, recounted in *The Heart of Community Engagement* (2019),
underscores the foundational importance of inner practice for developing the skills, attitudes,
relational awareness, fortitude, and sense of purpose of the effective community engagement
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practitioner—the one with the mística, as I learned to call it in Latin America. Some people call these “soft” skills, referring to inter-personal skills. But they go well beyond, incorporating generative, integrative, and holistic sensing skills. I call them the “being skills” that undergird “doing skills.” Or more precisely, the “inter-being” skills of ensemble awareness that undergird collaborative action. Many graduate programs around the country, especially in management and education, have already taken up the call to teach these inter-being skills. This nascent trend is part of the historic shift from the techno-rational Cartesian worldview to the quantum view of the interconnectedness and unpredictability of dynamic complexity.

From self-awareness to ensemble awareness

The inner practice of community engagement is a journey of self-discovery. As mindful practitioners, we find the place within us where we may harbor subtle traces of “othering” that surprise us. We get in touch with our own feelings of being “othered” simply for who we are or what we value. We develop the courage to let go of, and rise above, the feelings and thoughts that victimize us and others, in order to see the opportunity in front of us to serve a larger purpose that embraces both. We develop the capacity to notice when the heart closes, when fear takes us, when judgment separates us, and we begin to recognize that moment of choice to let go of those feelings and take in the bigger picture, feeling once again connected. Instead of focusing attention on what’s wrong, we focus on what’s possible. Realigned with that purpose, we pause in the uncertainty of not knowing and step forward into the golden opportunity to serve or make a difference that lies right in front of us.  

Through generative mindfulness—a conscious inner practice—community engagement practitioners embody and foster an awareness of the whole, the collective. This is Ensemble Awareness: The practitioner becomes part of a living system that generates its own evolution each moment (Wilson, 2019, p. 13).

A story of awareness-based action research in Mexico

The outer practice of community engagement is the movement from self-awareness to awareness of the social field in which the practitioner is engaged, embedding and attuning to that social field as a living entity, in relationship. Based on prior visits, my graduate students and I at the University of Texas were invited to work with a small non-profit in a low-income informal community known as La Campana, located on a hill near the heart of booming Monterrey, Mexico. Despite its central location, it was isolated by the lack of streets and vehicle access, basic infrastructure and services, safety, and security. The legacy from the cartel violence of previous decades could still be felt in the mistrust that divided the residents. The leader of the non-profit, Celina, wanted us to help them build bridges of trust and solidarity within the community, bringing together residents in a common endeavor that would show visible, concrete results, and increase community pride.

Our work together (https://youtu.be/0V3zSN13WBc) was not master-planned. It became an unfolding dance—every action in the present moment, attuning to the residents’ movements and rhythms, sometimes following sometimes initiating, always exploring, and always creating space, allowing, observing, listening, feeling, attuning, being fully present, connecting, using art and music, doing with—not for, letting go, being surprised. The children became the first protagonists of change, envisioning a gang-tagged dumpsite as a playground. The first turning point came when the children presented their drawings and dreams to the adults and came up with a name for the park, El Parque de Los Niños. The parents looked at each other—they had...
no choice. They said, “Yes, Let’s do it!” and had to back up their words with actions—showing up, building trust, sharing resources and talents—each action becoming another breakthrough.

For me, the magic was not only witnessing the growing sense of agency of the community but witnessing how my team of students and I learned to trust the unfolding process, dance with it, appreciate each other, and bond with the community members. Daily we reviewed our thoughts and actions to assess and reaffirm our alignment with Purpose, connecting each of us to something larger than ourselves. Articulated in our individually written Credos for Practice, the power of purpose carried us forward, a magnetic pole helping us discern each next step amidst the volatility and uncertainty of practice.

The students’ credos reflected in their own ways much of what I said in mine:

I choose to focus on what is possible, not on what is wrong.
I hold my personal and professional opinions lightly, as propositions to be tested rather than positions to be defended or imposed.
I am vigilant in my mental hygiene to let go of disempowering thoughts, cynicism, despair, and condemnation.
I foster collaborative inquiry and create spaces for such inquiry to flourish.
I safely hold the tension between competing views and see the result as a fertile field of possibility.
I discern where my professional knowledge can contribute to the collective process rather than overwhelm or undermine it.
I choose to see myself not as an outsider looking at a system in need of change, but as a participant in an evolving system in process of change.
I seek to find my own role in fostering the next evolutionary step toward health and well-being that is wanting and able to emerge, trusting in a larger wisdom to unfold. I seek attunement to that larger wisdom, a field of resonance with the emergent, and a dialogic presence with my co-creative collaborators (Wilson, 2019, Box 9.1, p. 220).

The other mindful practice tool we created supported our inner practice. We brought our personal lists of Mindful Action Rules for the Participatory Change Agent. Each “rule” was precisely designed to help us catch our own triggers and fears before they could make us reactive or self-concerned. Thus we could be more fully present and open-hearted, better able to sense the living social field we were co-creating, trust the process, and attend to the emergent possibilities unfolding before us (see Wilson, 2019, Box 9.2, p. 221).

By the end of our stay, we realized our presence had opened new spaces and new possibilities for the community members. They realized what they had accomplished was far more than they had imagined possible: not just a cleaned-up dump site, not just a new children’s park, but youth with a sense of possibility and adults with a sense of collective caring, trust, and agency. Just as in Lao Tsu’s ancient poem:

Go to the people.
Live with them, love them.
Work with them. Learn from them.
Start from where they are, build on what they have.
When the work is done the people will say, “We did it ourselves.”

To this day, the cadre of active participants message us with photos and news of continuing improvements and further community building. The doctoral student who was so deeply
moved by our experience, himself an architect and long-time resident of Monterrey, has been asked to lead the municipal government’s effort to create more just and generative relations with informal communities.

And this leads to the implications for inclusion, which Lemuel Watson focuses on as a university administrator.

**Lemuel: Genuine inclusion**

When reflecting on what I have learned about stillness, connection with others, and nature that I obtained growing up in rural Carolina, I see that I was taught awareness practices and compassion by my elders sitting on a front or back porch, underneath the pecan trees, interacting with the animals, and observing the elements of the wind, sky, earth, and seasons. There was an informal curriculum, a teacher, and a code of ethics taught and augmented over many years. Such wisdom, if you will, is as valid and reliable as many studies of research that have surfaced in contemporary times about the practice of mindfulness and awareness.

My informal practices have been augmented by more formal methods and education about mindfulness, neuroscience, integrated and dedicated practices from multiple practitioners and scholars. Having been trained as a certified mindfulness teacher, I appreciate the secular approach. Still, I know that without the sincerity of individuals wishing to connect in a compassionate and empathic way, something is lost in translation. The notion of sacredness and interconnectedness is in my ontological DNA and the essence of how I show up in the world, with mindfulness practices impacted by this. I am reminded of *sankofa*, an African word that means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch that which you have forgotten”—human beings should remember the past to make positive progress in the future. Everything I do is with sacredness and an attitude of love, care, and giving. I genuinely desire to embrace the principle of *ubuntu*—an African word that means humanness or “I am because we are”—which becomes a way to be together as a community.

**Inclusion is foundational for creating spaces to be**

When I came to Indiana to support the university in anti-racism, I wanted to create a leadership space where I could meet people where they are, value them for who they are right now, and know them. From the moment of my job interview, I tried to make it clear that there is room on my team for spirituality, for care, for love, for compassion—words that can feel foreign in higher education. Humans are our most important resource, and I want the humans I encounter to feel clearly that they matter. Recognizing our humanity as we strive to humanize our organizations is the most pressing issue for transformative practices for leaders. In becoming, one is not separated or singular in the experience, because a person turns back to legacy and history and gathers something of the past and carries it forward in spirit and mind.

Being a leader who is led by spirit, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness for better or worse. René Dubos (1981) noted that “human institutions must be held together by forces of a spiritual nature” (p. 133), an insightful way of thinking about leadership. The feeling of living as a spiritual being having a human experience has propelled me to a moment in my life in which I am leading Indiana University’s Anti-Racist Agenda as a key driver of the university’s success (for more details www.antiracist.iu.edu). Our anti-racist agenda describes our way of doing business, how we educate, and how we serve to advance our culture of belonging. We look introspectively at our policies, procedures, and culture and act to provide an open and supportive environment for all faculty, staff, and students. The
agenda aims to bring together those from all backgrounds and beliefs and the entire range of the human experience to create a deep sense of belonging for all. As a result of the Anti-Racist Agenda, all individuals, especially Black and Brown people, will know that at Indiana, you can be yourself because we celebrate your uniqueness; if you feel threatened, there are resources to support you; and we value the diversity and experiences you bring because it is vital to the innovation, culture, academics, community, and humanity of our institution.

On the ground, this translates for me into a shared communal leadership model, including people in the decision-making process wherever I can. Shared governance is an important way to hold each other accountable, so when my team meets, every single person is invited to speak, to add to the conversation. We often open meetings by inviting each other to be present: So much of our time is spent rushing from meeting to meeting to meeting, barely giving us the chance to bring our minds to the current moment. Before a meeting is concluded, I ask each person if they have anything else before we adjourn. Allowing each to contribute during the meeting and to offer any concluding thought creates the space for each one to be acknowledged as a valued person on the team.

Toward the future for inclusion in a global world

Inclusion in a global world calls upon us all to embrace our differences as well as our similarities as humans. Becoming a global citizen and embracing inclusion is best understood as a transformative process involving shifts in beliefs, values, norms, and ways of knowing (Bamber, 2016; Kiely, 2004; Perry et al., 2012; Taylor, 1994). Michael Tarrant (2010) defined a global citizen as someone who accepts a political obligation to act in a “just and fair manner” toward or on behalf of “people who have no immediate relationship to the self … and often live far away,” without expecting anything in return; global citizenship also involves “thinking about and acting on issues of justice, the environment, and civic obligations” (p. 435).

This process of learning and adapting as we become more interconnected was pioneered by sociologist Jack Mezirow (1991), who outlined what he believed were the key phases of the transformation process in educating ourselves for this type of inclusion. The process is triggered by a “disorienting dilemma” that reveals the limits of the learner’s perspective. This dilemma then leads the learner to question and critically assess their assumptions. Following this assessment, the learner explores other options for new roles and relationships and then builds competence and self-confidence in these new roles and relationships. Finally, the conditions dictated by their fresh perspective provide the learner with the skills to implement a different course of action—a stage Mezirow calls “reintegration” (p. 169). Individuals who begin to learn about mindfulness have conveyed that there is something they learn about how to be in the world after experiencing these practices.

The notion and act of becoming is an awareness, a change, and a condition that requires me to be cognizant of how dynamic the environment is, while compelling me to be present within my own body, mind, and spirit in a way that offers wisdom to situations and circumstances. The self does not lie passively in waiting for us to discover it. Selfhood is made in the active, ongoing process of struggles to learn on the way to becoming and in the relationship with others (Kaag, 2018). As I live, I am growing, learning, exploring, and testing my knowledge and theories daily with the unknowns of my organizations, their constituents, and the context in which they are surrounded. This means being aware of one’s purpose, actions, and responsibility while acknowledging that we are each a part of something greater than ourselves. We should work to operate with our fullest integrity, dignity, and wisdom as we possibly can as humans and as leaders.
Conclusions

As a world with tremendous diversity, we all face continually challenging crises, polarization, and suffering. Integrating generative mindfulness into how we impact social change is essential in the face of the many tough issues. Here, the three of us have shown how in our experience it is not only possible but necessary to lead from such a space. Unless one is able to rest one’s mind sufficiently to be present to the person in front of us and the situation that is unfolding, we re-enact past dramas.

Generative mindfulness not only gives us the pause to be present: it also opens our hearts to provide the compassion and healing balm needed. It makes us aware of the whole, the social field around us, so that we can be in conscious service to its highest unfolding. Generative mindfulness can be the grounding force to keep us knitted together across chasms of suffering and grief as well as joy and love. Such awareness of self and other opens the mind and the heart to what is needed now, to how I can serve. It enables leaders to feel responsibility for the well-being of the whole, recognizing that all is connected—there is no separation.

Furthermore, awareness-based action research facilitates the deep community engagement so needed now. Without generative mindfulness, we are unlikely to create genuine inclusion—being the most human we can be. Perhaps our greatest hope is that individuals will be exposed to the power of a pause, a breath, the stillness needed to remind us that we have a choice in how we want to respond. Does my choice bring me suffering or cause others to suffer here and now or in the future? In sharing this work with others, whether they welcome or resist all things related to mindfulness, meditation, and awareness-based system change, they may take away seeds that germinate, so they generate their own ideas for creating the beloved community that Martin Luther King dreamed we as humans would see here on earth.

Notes

1 When you read the word “we,” sometimes it refers to us as a team of three authors, but sometimes we intend it to mean we, as human beings. We (as authors) think it will be clear to you which is meant—and we certainly hope so!

2 This is our own definition, as practitioners and trained practice leaders. The definition that is used most widely in the research comes from Kabat Zinn (2011) “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally” (p. 291). The challenges in defining mindfulness are discussed in Creswell (2017) as well as the articles mentioned in endnote 3 and in Dunne (2011).

3 For thorough reviews of the research on mindfulness in workplaces and with regard to leadership, see Badham and King (2021) and Reitz et al. (2020). For a solid, research-based discussion of how mindfulness is a key factor for human flourishing, see Dahl et al. (2020).

4 There are what are called namtar or spiritual autobiographies written by such beings. One book by a Western scholar about this is called Enlightened Beings (Willis, 1995).

5 See Wilson (2019) for practitioner stories that provide concrete examples of community engagement practitioners who have crossed this threshold.

References

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