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Donald McCown
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Josie Billington
University of Liverpool

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Correspondence: Sitting and Reading as Two Routes to Community

Donald McCown
West Chester University
of Pennsylvania

Josie Billington
University of Liverpool

This epistolary dialogue between teachers involved with different, but complementary, contemplative practices—mindfulness-based group programs and reading groups (in which people come together to read literary poems or stories)—explores how such practices build community and imbue participants with the potential to act in caring and just ways in other contexts. Through narratives of group experiences and presentations of physiological and neurophysiological evidence, the two correspondents delineate three pedagogical strategies to achieve the desired ends: (1) looking beyond individualism, (2) attending to intensity, and (3) living with the text. Number one notes that students come to a group with expectations for individual progress and satisfaction, which, paradoxically, are most available within and because the atmosphere of group setting holds, supports, and offers each participant opportunities in which each can be fully with and in their experience, or, to put it another way, to touch the “really real.” Number two notes that the more often the group touches the really real, there is formed a more emotionally open human community, to which students belong, and together may move more towards justice and caring. Number three, living with the text, suggests the routes toward such community, which are essential to the contemplative dimension of academic teaching: profound spoken dialogue arising from meditation practice may become unique texts for the group, and literary texts read aloud and responded to also serve to intensify the atmosphere of the moment and quicken an ethical way of knowing that may become available later, in other communities.

INTRODUCTION

The following exchange of letters was prompted by an enthusiastic email from the first author (Don) on the recently released book *Is Literature Healthy?* (2016) by the second author (Josie). Don had been seeking new ways to think and talk about the unique communities that are co-created within such programs but, ironically, have been obscured by the individualism and reductionism inherent in the science that has powered the widespread acceptance of mindfulness (McCown, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi, 2010, 2016). Josie’s book and email response that detailed the “atmosphere” of reading groups offered new possibilities—a dazzling congruence with the atmosphere developed in mindfulness groups, and intimations of how reading aloud and practicing mindfulness were paths to building community.

The two new friends agreed that they should continue their correspondence in a (slightly) more formal mode, through letters aimed at exploration—rather than a paper aimed at integration—of their observations and ideas. In the exchange that follows, they share perspectives on three areas of connection: the uses of a text, the creation of an atmosphere, and the instilling of potentials for community. The texts in shared reading are easy to locate. The idea of texts in mindfulness groups may seem at first to be a contradiction, but with a second look, they reveal their importance. Atmosphere is where this project started: both correspondents use the term, but came to it through different routes. The last idea, of potentials, is a shared question: how do participants’ experiences of being together carry forward beyond their groups? Here is a crucial inquiry, because any means of developing and sustaining community deserve deep consideration in our current global political and social environment.

* * *

THE USE OF A TEXT

Dear Josie,

When I read your book, I felt you were taking me by the hand and showing me all that I care about in my work with the mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), yet with a view and a voice that made them even more strange and wonderful. The pedagogy of the MBIs does not rely on reading, yet one important thing we have in common, it seems to me, is the use of texts. I hope that I am not doing violence to the word when I assert this.

MBIs are centered on teaching and learning mindfulness, defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn’s formulation, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994, p. 4). In the classroom, in formal meditation practice, and all other activity, this becomes a motion of the mind—to be with and in the experience of moment, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Not an easy thing! The pedagogy takes this to heart, by offering guided practices of up to 45 minutes (therefore, much of the class is spent in silence) and then engaging in dialogue about the experience. While such dialogue is entirely voluntary, a key activity in the class is “inquiry,” in which the teacher assists a participant in exploring his or her experience. Such conversations are not simply for the individual participant; rather, much that is said may affect every one in the room (McCown et al., 2010; Crane et al., 2014; Santorelli, 2016).

Here’s a simple example from my teaching. The class has completed a body scan, paying attention to experiences of sensations in a guided tour, as it were, from head to toes. I ask the class an open question, “How was this for you?” There is silence, which is cool with me. At last, a middle-aged man across the cir-

cle from me says, “I feel more connected somehow.” With genuine curiosity, I ask, “More connected to what?” Quickly he replies, “More connected to myself, and my family, and other people.” Then a long pause, which is also cool. “But mostly to myself,” he says slowly. “That’s what’s really different.” Maybe he has noticed a subtle shift, or perhaps he’s found out something dizzyingly new.

Something happened, and the whole class was there. The other participants were quiet, alert, and engaged in their own reflections and, possibly, their own recognitions and insights. This was a “mindful” moment, a turning towards and being with/in the experience of the moment. It’s a “text” for the class—a new thought, articulated and shared. It was generated within the community of participants, who possess it as shared memory, and also have their own interpretations and related experiences. They may speak to the class of what they’ve noticed, as sometimes happens, or they may remain silent, as is more common. Through two decades of attending to the speech and silence of mindfulness groups, I’ve come to see the varied ways in which even the simplest of texts can resonate with participants.

An inquiry dialogue is often an opportunity for the two interlocutors and all of those listening and thinking along to discover something—to recognize and loosen patterns of reactivity, habits of thinking, and even static concepts of self. Affect, ambiguity, and a sense of searching and yearning create a situation with a depth that is, well, literary. Consider this exchange, taken from the introductory session of an MBSR course (McCown, 2016):

“What brings me here is my panic disorder...Oh, my name is Jessica...sorry,” says a young woman. “My therapist thinks that this course can help me not react so big and fast. I start to get anxious, and I don’t like the feelings I get...they scare me...and so I need to take something, or call my Mom or my boyfriend, before I end up in a panic.”

“That doesn’t sound like the easiest way to be,” the teacher ventures.

“It’s tiring...for everyone,” she says.

“How is it with you right now?” the teacher asks. “Is there anxiety here?”

“Yeah, a bit.”

“Would you be willing to explore it, just a little, in a mindful way? Maybe there’s a way to be with it that’s different than what you’ve been doing. You’re in charge, so you can stop any time, OK?”

“OK,” says Jessica.

To the group, the teacher says, “While Jessica and I explore her

experience, maybe you can find a way—not to watch, exactly, yet to be connected to your own experience. I suspect that quite a few of you may be interested in ways to be with anxiety. Yes?” Hands sprout around the circle. Jessica looks around, maybe settling a little more in her chair.

“So, Jessica, are you still noticing some anxiety?” the teacher asks.

“Some, yeah,” she says quietly.

The teacher asks, also quietly, “If you bring attention to your body right now, can you feel where that anxiety is showing up? Just take your time and feel into it...”

Quickly she answers, “In my back. That’s where it’s been a lot recently. It sort of moves around...”

From the teacher: “Can you bring your attention there? And see what you find out about that feeling?”

“That’s scary, but I’ll try.” A longish pause. “OK, I am...I’m paying attention.”

“And what is the feeling like?”

“It’s like, constricted...tight.”

“Do you know anything more? Like how big the area is, or, maybe, what shape it is...” And the teacher waits quietly, with a curious and patient expression and attitude.

With her thumbs and forefingers Jessica makes a long, horizontal oval. “It’s a rectangle, about this big, in the center of my back. It’s really tight.”

“OK,” says the teacher. “You’re right there with it...I wonder if you can find a way to give it a little room, to open some space around it? Maybe you can use your breath to soften around it...” She looks puzzled, and the teacher elaborates. “Can your breath go to that part of your back when you breathe in? Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so...Yeah.”

“So when you breathe in, letting some space open up around that rectangle...and when you breathe out, letting it stay soft...” Jessica, the teacher, and the participants in the space breathe in the quiet for thirty seconds—a long time. The teacher asks, “What more do you know about that spot now? Anything?”

“It’s gotten smaller,” Jessica replies. “Much smaller...It’s like the size of my finger, now.” (pp. 18-19)

Here, again, *something* has happened, and not just for Jessica. Participants likely undertook parallel investigations of anxiety, perhaps with different outcomes. There were verbal and nonverbal gestures of sympathy, empathy, maybe even apathy. There was, no doubt, resistance to the process. All of it potentiated by this “text,” which is now in the repertoire of the class—a unique co-creation.

At another level—and importantly for moving my thinking into the realm of community—people are sitting together in the room in a different way after such an event. I have much to say about this, but I’ll hold it for another letter. For now, I want to pull just one thread—freedom—and take its measure. I’ve taught the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction curriculum more than a hundred times, and more than twenty-five of those were for undergraduate students. Almost all participants come into the room with the “banking” model of education as their dominant expectation, and the undergrads are steeped in it. They are waiting for the teacher to start depositing information. When they meet an event of inquiry instead, they are often frustrated, even fearful. Suddenly the teacher is not the dependable expert with the answers, but only another curious participant who has a vocation to stand with them in the open space where meaning may unfold. Students are asked to assume authority within their own experiences. Their lifetime habits of reticence have no useful place; they are asked to get in the game. Even if they never speak aloud, they may still play silently.

I’ll close with what I trust is a good description of the game that participants are entering. James Carse (1989) suggests that there are both finite and infinite games. The finite ones come to mind quickly. They have set rules, so we can win or lose, and be certain about it. The infinite ones have rules that constantly adjust, so the game can go on indefinitely, creating not winners or losers, but insights and more mystery.

Are there any correspondences here to your use of texts? The ball is in your court.

All good wishes,
Don

* * *

Dear Don,

Thank you for your very heartening words and for offering this insight into your practice.

What strikes me immediately is that, as in the reading groups I have written about, the shared “text” is experienced primarily as a personal human voice. In Shared Reading (SR), people come together weekly in small groups (up to 12) to read aloud together a poem or story. The material ranges across genres and

period, and is chosen for its intrinsic interest, not pre-selected with a particular “condition” in mind. The groups are led by trained facilitators, who read aloud, pausing regularly to encourage reflection on thoughts or memories the literary work has stirred. Group members control their own involvement, contributing or reading aloud themselves as much or little as they wish.

These are not usually “bookish” people or conventional “readers”; very often the *idea* of a “literary text” would be quite alienating, not “for them.” But at moments such as the one I describe below, the poem exists as a vocal human presence, its emotional power and vulnerability heard and felt as immediately as Jessica’s expression of pain— “constricted...tight.”

The group—part of a recovery programme for drug and alcohol addiction—is listening to a reading of John Clare’s “I Am” (1848; in Davis, 2011):

I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love’s frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed
Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,

Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life’s esteems;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

“It has really—hit me, right there,” says Dawn, pointing to her heart. As other group members agree, supportively, that this is a “powerful poem,” Dawn holds up her hand as if to signal that she needs time, and suddenly leaves the room. She returns some minutes later and, restraining tears, speaks directly to the group.

So—the way this is to me is I exist at the moment but...I am but I am not— [Alison, another group-member, says, helping out: “Living.”] Yeah. I am literally vapours, into the nothingness of what-have-you, and I feel like a shipwreck, and things I used to esteem in my life are no longer there [restraining tears], and I have been forsaken by a lot of people, so like I am a bit of a memory lost, isn’t it, no one really cares or wants to know [visibly struggling]. I want to be at peace...and to go back to that innocent childhood or you know that kind of untroubled place. So the whole thing kind of really got to me.

It is common for group-members to say versions of Dawn's "It hit me" in response to poetry which has a sudden effect. Startling at such times is how this "external" voice becomes immediately internal. When Dawn repeats the words of the poem, it is as though they are coming from her own heart—finding her own deep text, her inner self. This is what being "more connected to myself," as the man in the mindfulness group put it, can feel like, at its most intense, in SR.

The mode of meditative "attention" you describe—being "with and in the experience arising in the moment, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral"—is pretty nearly replicated in SR. But the mode of "inquiry" is a little different. The formal equivalent in SR to yourself as teacher in a mindfulness class is the group-leader. She is an essential component of the experience since it is her expert reading aloud and her encouragement to explore the text further—by re-reading lines of the text or pointing to specific words or phrases—which establishes the vocal key to everything that happens. But, as with Dawn, the role of the group-leader can be supplanted instantly by the power of the poem.

This apparently distinctive aspect of SR produces, even so, two effects which are consonant with the aims and achievements of mindfulness. First, when the book "takes over" or becomes "the expert," it is usually involuntary. The poem or story penetrates beneath formal or over-learned ways of knowing and thinking. Reading in this intense, carefully attuned way is closer to inhabiting an area of being, somewhere beneath default attitude. Out of this "place," thought can happen in a fresher, more "connected" way. This, as you suggest, is a wholly different order to usual pedagogic practice and student expectation. Second, at such times, the book operates not as an alienated authority but as a voice which gives (back) to the self experiences or intuitions which the reader had hardly known to be her own.

One element that seems different between the two activities, in both practice and effect, is this: in SR there is no necessary "and then"—that is, attention followed by (vocalized) reflection. What literary reading often seems to do is to put a person in place with and in presence of a feeling while *simultaneously* giving them the language to think and speak *about* it. This, like the comprehensive awareness which mindfulness encourages, seems an important counter to the "about" mode of thinking, cut off from connection with vital experience, which formal education all too often emphasizes.

What is certain is that such thinking can be a shared happening, like the insights of mindfulness. When Dawn inhabits the terrain of the poem, she embodies its meaning for the rest of group, on its behalf. The poem comes back to life in and through her. This never ceases to impress as remarkable—how words from another person, living in another place and century, are sensed by readers as almost physical events. When the dumb marks on the page live again, what lives also

is the feeling which summoned those words. The “community of participants” is suddenly, immeasurably widened.

Writing in *The Guardian* on the process of creating his recent novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders (2017) asks himself, “Why did I make those changes? On what basis?”:

On the basis that, if it’s better this new way for me, over here, now, it will be better for you, later, over there, when you read it. When I pull on this rope here, you lurch forward over there.

This is a hopeful notion, because it implies that our minds are built on common architecture—that whatever is present in me might also be present in you. “I” might be a 19th-century Russian count, “you” a part-time Walmart clerk in 2017, in Boise, Idaho, but when you start crying at the end of my (Tolstoy’s) story “Master and Man,” you have proved that we have something in common, communicable across language and miles and time, and despite the fact that one of us is dead.

Another reason you’re crying: you’ve just realised that Tolstoy thought well of you—he believed that his own notions about life here on earth would be discernible to you, and would move you.

Tolstoy imagined you generously, you rose to the occasion.

Best wishes,
Josie

* * *

CREATION OF AN ATMOSPHERE

Dear Josie,

As I was reading the scene in which Dawn makes her connection with the poem, I too made a connection—as a teacher—to the words of the poem, Dawn’s own words, and the palpable attention of the others to what was happening with her—and within them. I, like them, was open to unanticipated thoughts. *Something* happened for me, and that *something* fascinates me. It’s turned me into a collector—of theories or concepts that describe this phenomenon.

Over the years I’ve found many analogous ideas and descriptions of how people co-create ways of being together that help the group and its members. My collection is not an attempt to winnow down to one right way of being together. Rather, it’s a desire to push complementary and contrasting ideas into patterns

that tell more than each alone; it's *bricolage*. For this letter, I've selected three shapes and colors that fit because each has an ethical edge. Pressed together they suggest—however abstractly—the outline of a just and caring community.

The first concept gives us a term I hope we'll find useful: *witness*. Kind of a wonderful word, I think, punningly pointing to togetherness and mutual attention. It's opposite would be "aboutness," the way of thinking so common in clinical and educational practice—and in academic literary reading, as you note—that reduces everything and every thinker into an object. For communications scholar John Shotter (2011), "witness" is inescapable. We are sensitive organisms and "cannot not respond" to the ones with us. We are in continuous dialogue, spoken and unspoken. Shotter (2012) brings this home by observing that when a friend's attention strays we ask things like, "Are you with me?" or "Have I lost you?" or even "Where were we?" We accompany each other in thought. So there is witness in reading (the text can "take over" as you describe)—and writing, too, Josie.

People discover new thoughts together. Insights, even about ourselves, are not arrived at alone. As Jessica spoke in my class, something happened for the whole group. In the SR group, Dawn, John Clare, and the participants thought alongside each other in ways they might not have, otherwise.

We go along and get along. Shotter (2012) puts the moral dimension of this directly:

[A]s soon as I begin an interchange of looks with another person, and I sense them as looking toward me in a certain way (as they see me looking toward them in a similar way also), a little *ethical and political world* is created between us. (p. 7)

The second piece in the *bricolage* is the unspoken way that little ethical and political world is created. It's physiological at its base, and it becomes more obvious as the group moves into more quiet forms of practice. For many participants, focusing on a practice leads to greater bodily stillness and relaxation. We call it *self-regulation*, but it is not an individual achievement; rather, everyone in the group is implicated. The mirror neuron system in our brains (Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Rizzolatti, 1996) responds to the bodily conditions of the others in the group; if they are still and relaxed, our mirror neurons try that on, and we feel what it is like for others. So, even if we are not so calm, we have another opportunity to move in that direction.

Let's say, now, we have a class that has reached a regulated place, together. Here's what makes it a little ethical and political world: Stephen Porges's (2011) "polyvagal theory" of regulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). It's based on the evolution of the autonomic nervous system in vertebrates. Mammals have

three behavioral strategies for adapting to life-threatening situations, and challenging situations, and situations of safety and caring. Respectively, the strategies are *freeze*, *fight/flight*, and what Porges calls *social engagement*. When the environment feels safe, he says, the new vagus nerve slows our heart rate, inhibits fight/flight, and regulates us for optimal meeting with others. Our eyes open wider to see others better, the inner ear tunes to the range of the human voice, the muscles of the face and neck gain tone to produce even the most subtle expressions and gestures, and the muscles used for talking gain tone to make us more articulate. Best of all, there is a release of oxytocin—the “love” hormone of birthing, nursing, and pair bonding.

In the group, then, as we discover familiar or friendly faces, voices, gestures, and postures, the social engagement response may kick in, bringing a sense of calm and safety that is self-reinforcing.

The third piece in this bricolage is my attempt to describe what happens (and doesn't) in an MBSR class to shape its often remarkable atmosphere. Based on the thorough analysis of the curriculum and pedagogy that underpins the book *Teaching Mindfulness: A Practical Guide for Clinicians and Educators* (McCown et al., 2010), and more than a decade of my own teaching experience, I created a model of the atmosphere, which I've called the ethical space of mindfulness (McCown, 2013). It is defined by seven key qualities distributed through three dimensions.

In the *doing* dimension, three qualities define the work of the class.

Corporeality emphasizes embodied experience. Mindfulness meditation connects us to the present moment by foregrounding sensations, such as the breath moving in the body, which can only be felt *now*. Because we feel our emotions (and aesthetic impressions!) in the body, the more we focus on it, the more we begin to know about ourselves. We can think—together—in way quite different from typical healthcare interventions.

Contingency automatically deconstructs our experiences. In mindfulness practice, we watch the continual changing and passing away of body sensations; we observe how our distressing (or desired) emotions shift with those sensations; and we become aware of how unstable our thinking is—so new insights and meanings are always possible.

Cosmopolitanism contains the meanings that arise in the group, without the usual impulses to reduce, abstract, or fit them into any system or set of values. New thoughts are simply held and honored by the teacher and participants.

In the *non-doing* dimension, there are things that simply don't happen—in contrast to typical interventions.

Non-pathologizing refers to the perspective that defines MBSR. As Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990, p. 2) put it, and as countless teachers have told their classes since, “if you are breathing there is more right with you than there is wrong.” Ideally, no

diagnoses or labels are applied to anyone by the teacher, nor do participants apply them to themselves.

Non-hierarchical describes the group relationship in dialogue. No one is an expert on the unfolding of the present moment, and no meaning can be imposed on the ever-changing experience. All talking in the group is just exploring, with nothing set or settled.

Non-instrumental may be the most difficult to grasp of the qualities. The class does not practice mindfulness for some particular outcome—to get better at this, or get rid of that—but rather as a way to investigate the unknown of the present moment. Nevertheless, as we observe body sensations, thoughts, and emotions, and enter into dialogue about experience, there is potential for transformation.

The third dimension, *Friendship*, is better considered as the total character of the ethical space. It is not “held” by the teacher or participants in some way. There is no choice to be friendly, the space simply *is* friendly. Yet that relational dimension is not part of the teaching in the MBIs. Participants do speak of it—often quite poetically—but only in the closing moments of the course. This paradox of a remarkable experience going unremarked perhaps helps to assure its continuance. Participants steep in a remarkable atmosphere and come away transformed, equipped for the next situations of their lives. But that’s for my next letter.

In Witness,
Don

* * *

Dear Don,

I love the idea of “witness” as opposed to “aboutness” and wholly agree that writing and reading are somehow reciprocal in fostering this way of thinking. A colleague once said to me (regarding George Eliot’s classic nineteenth-century novel, *Middlemarch*) that perhaps it is only when we read fiction or poetry that we ever get inside another person’s mind and feel and think “with” them, made possible through the author’s deep attunement to the inner lives of her imagined characters. I ventured in my book (Billington, 2016) that SR helps to realise the communities of readers which George Eliot hoped her novels would create. “The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings,” she wrote, “is that those who read them should be able to feel the pains of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring creatures” (Haight, 1954-78).

But where George Eliot envisaged virtual communities, you and I encounter real ones. It is startling how much of the “quality of corporeality” you identify as defining the atmospheric space of mindfulness is perceptible in SR. My attention was first powerfully brought to this by staff in a female prison who observed the

behaviours of those engaged in SR. Women who were customarily agitated and distracted—“nervous,” “twitchy,” “fidgety”—and often confrontational or disruptive—“shouting out,” “complaining,” “arguing”—would sit still, listen intently, concentrate wholly on the text. “Disciplined relaxation” is how one staff member described this: “They’re calm; at the same time they’re working really really hard” (Robinson & Billington, 2014; Billington, Longden, & Robinson, 2016a). This was an atmosphere and mode of engagement “unique” within the prison and an example which vindicates your characterization of SR as a “contemplative form of practice.” I like that formulation!

There are strong signs from our research that the contemplative atmosphere and group-ness are simultaneously produced by the literary text getting “into” the participants bodily as it is read aloud. These are the words, significantly, of members of an SR group suffering chronic pain:

“It is not just the way it is written. It is the way [Group-Leader] reads it ... You can feel the emotion in her voice, feel it deep inside.”

“It seems to resonate.”

“The poem becomes more 3D, more alive.”

“It creates a stillness and peace in the room.”

It was the literature first “coming alive” as a sensory event—getting “through” or “inside” as if by deep emotional transmission from book to reader—which enabled recovery, our study found, of buried emotional matter and articulation of hidden pain (Billington et al, 2016b). Currently, we are trying experimentally to discover the physiological processes underlying such experience. Early signs are that heart rates are at their most synchronized within SR when a text is read aloud, as though the poem’s own “nervous system” is communicated and mirrored in its listeners. The effect is felt, as you say, in the “tone” of the whole group. When Dawn became upset in relation to the John Clare poem, Alison, the older group member who had supported Dawn when she first began to speak, offered her the comfort of physical touch when she had finished speaking in an instinctive act of (nurturing) love.

What is catalyzed here—as also in mindfulness as you unfold its characteristics—is a form of Porges’s “social engagement” that is deeper than the norm. The prison reading group is a human touchstone here. Commenting on the unwonted levels of patience, respect, and tolerance the women displayed towards one another’s views and sensibilities when mutually absorbed by SR, staff described the group as creating “a sort of bubble” or “invisible shield,” enveloping and protecting the women not only from the noise and distraction of their immediate environment, but also from any feelings of self-consciousness. “They simply exist in that time and space.”

This “special social and emotional space” seems virtually indistinguishable from what you call “the ethical space of mindfulness.” The pressures within a prison environment which SR temporarily resists or transcends are unique, of course. But perhaps—as in Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*—prison life offers an intensified version of normality, in which, the personal self and inner life are trapped in institutional norms until something more authentically “real” is released by the opening of a creative space.

The twentieth-century psychotherapist Wilfred Bion is especially valuable in helping to recognize and define what such moments constitute. For Bion (1970), the “moment of reality” or “the really real” cannot be abstractly comprehended because it does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning. It can “become” (its presence can be felt) but it cannot be known save in the moment of experience. Bion (1970) designated this reality “0,” knowing that no ordinary language would serve. I guess that is why the extraordinary language of poetry can be so powerful for finding or creating 0, since that is what its own words are actually in pursuit of: some primary or ultimate truth. The ethical “clearing out” which is harnessed by the stilling of mind and body in mindfulness practices seems analogous to, or a species of, 0.

This brings me, finally, to the matter of how to “teach” group leaders to create the pre-condition for 0—to foster the right atmosphere or resonance. For, by definition, this is to try to teach what is intangible and “unknowable,” either in advance or by formulaic example. I wonder whether this explains your own emphasis on *doing*. Certainly, in the research element of our work, we have learned that there is nothing so valuable as “live” primary data—video-recordings of reading groups for close analysis. Interviews with group-members are always “video-assisted” too: participants are re-immersed in the experience rather than recalling it post hoc, and thereby able to re-inhabit the feel of significant but small passing moments (Davis et al., 2015; Billington et al., 2016a).

We are currently trying to put together a series of short film edits of SR for training purposes. Unlike the inanimate, distanced training provided by a manual, the films demonstrate events as close as possible to lived time. They show the minute-by-minute transient processes taking place simultaneously at multi-dimensional levels (in voice, pitch, language, eye contact, body movements). More, practitioners can return to these “live” instances as often as they wish for guidance.

I am myself guided by the advice of the thinker and (medical) practitioner Michael Balint (contemporary and pupil of Wilfred Bion)—for whom it was precisely the “atmosphere” with which a doctor elicited a patient’s history or approached illness that was as essential to good care as diagnosis and treatment. The right atmosphere—vital to helping the patient “realise his or her real problems,” enabling the “really real” to emerge—cannot simply be prescribed. In his advice to general

practitioners on “How to Start” and “When to Stop” the patient interview, the only certainty, said Balint (1957), was that “the doctor must not get ahead of the patient emotionally.” This “not getting ahead” is the common “rule” in your own practices also?

Josie

* * *

INSTILLING OF POTENTIALS

Dear Josie,

Yes! Yes! Yes! I need to say that aloud, before even attempting to be articulate in response to your letter. I was with you all the way, right to the point of your question about not getting ahead of the patient emotionally. The answer is as you suspect: ideally, you are *with* the patient at all times. These correspondences between mindfulness groups and reading groups are not simply clarifying; they are beginning to answer my question of how contemplative practices might move us towards just and caring communities.

One of the descriptions you supplied for the reading group in the women’s prison, as they showed each other “unwonted levels of patience, respect, and tolerance,” was a bubble. That helped me think. A bubble like that is both beautiful—an ethical space of friendship—and evanescent—existing as the group’s witness does, and disappearing at its dispersal. But is it possible that those women might learn to recreate such bubbles elsewhere in their lives? If so, how might they be changed, and change others?

You suggest that the bubble of the prison group is produced as the story or poem gets into the participants *bodily* as it is read aloud. I’d urge us to think this through with our larger sense of “text.” You’ve given us Bion’s (1970) idea of the “really real,” or the “moment of reality,” or even “0,” as the content of a text. From my side, I’d say it’s being fully with and in the emerging experience of the moment. Whatever we call it, it’s what “hits” your participants in a poem, and it’s what touches the mindfulness class in an inquiry dialogue. The hit happens, the bubble forms, and participants are aware of it. Josie, you note that what participants gain is not found in the domain of knowledge or learning, but instead is something that can only be recognized or felt in the moment—a possibility or an awareness. Let me dip into my collection of concepts and offer a couple of useful (I hope) ways to express this process.

Kenneth Gergen (2009) sets out a view of life with others in opposition to what he calls *bounded being*—the dominant view that individuals set intentions and take voluntary actions. This is the view of pathology, expertise, and instrumental intervention, in which the inner self is broken but can be fixed by putting in a new thought or new pharmaceutical. Instead, Gergen offers a view of *relational being*, in

which a self is co-created within relationships moment by moment; there's nothing inside to be broken—or fixed. It's rather that relationships require adjustment.

Gergen (2009) uses the term *confluence* to describe the mutually defining relationships in a group. As an MBI class begins a formal meditation practice, say, those sitting still and quiet are defined as meditators, while the one speaking words of guidance is defined as a teacher. As the meditation ends, the confluence shifts, and meditators become partners speaking aloud in one-to-one dialogues. The next action, as participants and teacher join in a plenary dialogue, again arises from the relationships of the confluence.

Gergen (2009) also tells us that the relationships of a confluence imbue its participants with *potentials* for being and acting in particular ways. As people participate in the varied confluences of their lives, they come to possess many different potentials for being—in effect, they are *multi-beings*. “In sum, all meaning/full relationships leave us with another’s way of being, a self that we become through the relationship, and a choreography of co-action. From these three sources, we emerge with enormous possibilities for being” (p. 137).

This could seem abstract, or even mystical, so I’ll ground it in an idea from the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2008), who talks about “enskillment” rather than “learning.” He notes that valuable skills are not acquired by rote, but rather require constant adaptation. Even something as seemingly simple as cracking an egg is complex, since each egg is different. That means a child breaking eggs for an omelet would require repeated guidance from a skilled hand to help explore the feel of the process. The skill, which includes not just the process but also the bowls and pans and stove, is located outside the child, and she grows into it. As Ingold (2008) sums it, “You only get an omelette from a cook-in-the-kitchen” (p. 116).

In our groups, then, participants grow into potentials for ways of being as they steep in them. Your prison reading group participants steep in relationships through which, again and again, they touch-in to moments of reality and of becoming more still, attentive, patient, respectful, and tolerant. In a mindfulness group, participants steep in relationships in which it is possible to turn towards and be with/in whatever experience arises in the moment, and to be with others in a way that maintains an atmosphere of friendliness. Participants come away with new potentials in their multi-beings that can blossom later, in different groups—maybe even in larger communities. This is the ethical promise of contemplative practices.

To make that promise come true, I’m interested in analyzing how mindfulness courses can generate the optimum atmosphere for imbuing potentials. Most recently, I have been fascinated by the variability of intensity, particularly between clinical and educational groups (McCown, 2016a, 2016b). Classes in which moments of reality with strong emotions appear seem to have greater effects on participants. Relational connections deepen faster, the group can better hold par-

ticipants who explore challenging experiences, and the sense of an ethical space becomes stronger. Such intensity is typical with clinical populations, as there is suffering to be faced and an existential drive to face it. This is less true in educational settings, where participants are often healthier and happier. Fewer moments of reality arise, the atmosphere carries less power, participants appear less connected, and the ethical space is less evident. I've been puzzled by how to address this, until now.

The correspondences with reading groups suggest an answer. A mindfulness curriculum might rely less on the "traditional" texts generated from participants' experiences, and instead adopt literary texts, which can be used more formally—and assuredly—to increase depth and connection among participants. Such a shift would require a reframing of literary texts, away from the expectations of typical literary study, and into the read-aloud, embodied encounter that carries the text into the body, into the group, and into a more just and caring future.

What do you think, Josie? Is it possible to combine mindfulness and reading, to help intensify the atmosphere of the group, and—perhaps—more strongly imbue participants with ethical potentials?

Don

* * *

Dear Don,

Very interesting! I'm excited by the possibility of the literary text, as an embodied experience, becoming a part of mindfulness practice.

For me, in SR, 0 resides not so much in the content of the text but in the space momentarily created between the reader and the book when the text is read aloud. As in Dawn's experience, a text can touch off some latent or inarticulate matter that might hardly know it is in need of such release. Thoughts and feelings "happen" in live reading: they do not seem to come simply from "in" the reader's head, but nor are they simply "in" the book either. 0 is really produced out of the surprised overlap between the two. I have called it a "thought-space" which literature makes room for when ordinary life cannot (Billington, 2016). This in-between dimension is closely connected to the atmospheric group space with which we're both concerned, and I'll come back to that shortly.

But one key question is how these momentary instants—incontrovertibly powerful in themselves for their duration—carry over valuably into continuous life. I am resistant to the idea that they constitute a sort of lyric time-out, necessarily unconnected to prosaic experience. Yet I am equally averse to any attempt to identify explicit or definite outcomes in relation to processes which are deeply implicit. It is why I am especially interested in Gergen's idea of *potentials*. The self's relationship to the group is at first substituted in my thinking here by the self's relation to the text as a human-emotional and cognitive presence. But the key issue

seems to be the same: when a new relationship activates a new potential for being, is that potential available for future use?

At CRILS, we have characterised SR as “implicit psychotherapy” (Davis et al., 2015) for two reasons: first, its processes are distinct from the top-down approach of certain programmatic therapies and it works most compellingly by a kind of surprised involuntariness rather than via self-regulatory “steps”; second, the thinking which SR generates is often too complex or “intricate” (to use Eugene Gendlin’s words) for straightforward or final definition. This is thinking which happens “freshly at the edge of the implicit ... an always unfinished order that has to be taken along as we think” (Gendlin, 2004, p. 128). Such thinking is awoken by the literary text, but not concluded by it. Rather, this implicit matter is stored for future activation. In well-established SR groups, a poem or book will come back to a person, or the group, as a powerful memory across time. In a similar way, deep personal thinking can resurface or be realised again, as live meaning rather than dead concept. This process seems close to the steeped-in learning you describe in mindfulness. (I wonder whether Polanyi’s “tacit knowledge” is a common touchstone for us both also?)

For the psychologist on the CRILS team, Rhiannon Corcoran, the embodied or experiential nature of thinking within SR is crucial to actualisation of its potential beyond the group. Because live reading triggers unpredictable events, arising in the moment, it bypasses the brain’s routine prediction systems. Even past negative experiences can be re-felt or renewed in ways which challenge habitual emotions or recover them in a new form. One of the longer-term benefits of SR, a recent neurological study has suggested, may come from “diverting individuals away from processing their struggles via ingrained and ineffective channels and towards more diverse, novel and effective reasoning options” (O’Sullivan, 2015, p. 154). The executive brain gets to work with spontaneous “gut” responses and begins to integrate them into new models of the world.

This hypothesis is intuitively close to my own observation of SR and participant testimony: “From a poem or story, you can get these thoughts in your mind that you wouldn’t normally get. You can sort of take them away. What you have tried to absorb can come out later to help you when all these other things are spinning round in your mind that you want to get rid of.” SR offers an extended repertoire of models for thinking about experience—models which are powerful because they are not “flat” exemplars for living (step-by-step how-tos or bullet point strategies) but dynamically rich and sufficiently complex to match the intricacies of lived experience. This is SR’s equivalent of Gergen’s “multi-being”: the access to “another’s way of being” still from inside one’s own. The characters whom we meet in fiction, or the voices we intimately hear in poetry, offer new potentials for being—precisely, perhaps, because they do not present simple cure or solutions. Rather they model difficult experience or personal trouble which

cannot be readily resolved, yet in tones or shapes of thought which leave their imprint, healingly, on our own.

Although I have confined myself so far to the mobilization of potential when an individual encounters a literary text, that specific relation always occurs—by definition in SR—within the larger social relation of the group. It is the *nature* of “the social” which is transformed. The imaginative power of the literature and the shared personal meditation—often triggered in areas of experience otherwise difficult to locate or talk about—catalyses a small-group relation in which private and public are tangibly closer than is conventionally allowed. Out of the “interpersonality” (Davis, 2009) of individual, group and text, there is created a miniature model of—a felt potential for—a more emotionally open human community. This is where the “ethical promise” of mindfulness and SR themselves overlap.

Josie

* * *

NO CONCLUSIONS

Dear Josie (and Patient Reader),

Indeed, Polanyi’s *Tacit Dimension* is a shared text for us. Our current dialogue exhibits a kind of knowing that comes from steeping in a particular kind of space with others, and we do, in fact, “know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4). Whatever language we use in our attempts at telling—drawn from Gergen, Balint, or neuroscience—the possibilities of being together in more caring and just ways are salient for us. They are possible in groups in the moment of steeping, and then are available *tacitly* in other situations.

We’ve gestured towards some quiet strategies to create such knowing that we might adopt (or expand) in our own teaching. I see three: (1) looking beyond individualism, (2) attending to intensity, and (3) living with the text.

The first points to the paradox that our participants are heavily focused on their own individual success and satisfaction, which, paradoxically, are most available in and because of all participants in the class. It’s the group atmosphere that holds, supports, and offers each participant more than they can tell; or, put another way, it creates opportunities for students to touch the “really real.”

The second strategy, intensity, makes the first work. The more often the group touches what’s really real, the greater its influence on participants. As you put it in your third letter, Josie, in the powerful moments, “there is created a miniature model of—a felt potential for—a more emotionally open human community, a kind of alternative society.” As participants develop potentials to be with and in that alternative society, they move more towards justice and caring.

The third strategy, living with a text, allows any group to access the benefits of intensity. For some groups, participants’ life circumstances bring experiences

of the really real that, shared aloud, become texts that catalyze an ethical space and help instill potentials for such a way of being together. When participants' circumstances reduce opportunities to touch the really real, literary texts read aloud and responded to within the group can—as it were, by proxy—intensify the atmosphere and make it possible for participants to have new thoughts and try on new ways of being.

All three of these strategies coalesce to enhance the potentials of a class. The contemplative undertaking is text and more. I want to say that it is *song*. It cannot be reduced to something we can tell, but it can again and again transport us—together—in a bubble, in 0, in an ethical space. One of the foremost *lieder* singers of our time, Christian Gerhaher, captures the character of song to which I allude: “A song is not drama. A song is not narration. A drama would be an opera, and a narration would be an oratorio, or a Passion. Drama is showing you a story. It wants to be understood. But a song—and a poem—is never to be understood entirely. It is always open” (Allen, 2016).

As ever,
Don

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Useful websites:

Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/psychology-health-and-society/research/reading-literature-and-society/about/>

The Reader

<http://www.thereader.org.uk>