

## Creating Circles of Peace

### *Mindfulness as a Pastoral Response to Health, Education, and Violence in the Black Community*

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For the entire year that I was in the fourth grade I was terrorized by a girl in my class, also named Marsha. How embarrassing is that? She was bigger, stronger, and definitely more streetwise than I ever hoped or even wanted to be. I never quite figured out why she didn't like me, but every day she would jeer at me across the classroom. With her knuckles keenly accentuated by her closed fist, Muscular Marsha would tap the area under her eyes—first the right then the left—while she mouthed the words, “See you at 3:15!” She seemed to derive pure pleasure from seeing how terrified I was as I anticipated being annihilated before I even left the school grounds at the end of the day.

My parents were the original pacifists. My two sisters and I probably got two spankings among us the whole time we were growing up! And, unlike many of my friends' parents, mama and daddy never instructed me to fight back. So, no matter how threatening the *other* Marsha became, no matter how afraid I was, my daily strategy was to appeal to what I hoped existed deep down inside of her—even the smallest kernel of decency and compassion. I utilized every oratorical technique I could muster to try and convince Mean Marsha that beating me up would not benefit her in the least; and that, in fact, it ran counter to the goodness that I *knew* was at the core of her very being.

This sappy monologue continued for the entire school year and, undoubtedly, Massive Marsha became bored out of her mind listening to my philosophical, you're so-much-better-than-this speeches. Eventually (which seemed like an eternity), she just left me alone. And, here is the amazing thing. Not once during that whole time did she ever actually beat me up. In fact, she never even laid a hand on me. But for months I was completely terrorized and traumatized by the constant mental and emotional violence inflicted by this ten-year-old bully. Little did I know at the time that I was a peacebuilder-in-training.

Have you ever said to yourself, “I'm no Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Teresa, but I want to do *something* to help bring peace to the world!” If so, you have the heart of a peacebuilder! The good news is that you don't need a Nobel Peace Prize to begin the important work of peacebuilding. You don't even need celebrity status, wealth, a degree, or a title. All you need is intention, an open heart, and a willingness to put your words into action. Ps 34:14 says, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”<sup>82</sup>

The nightly news vividly documents unspeakable violence both foreign and domestic.

Sadly, gang wars, carjackings, robberies, murders of children, and domestic abuse are all right here, in our faces, up close and personal. But as much as we would like to place the blame of violence out there in the world, on someone else, Thich Nhat Hanh, writer, poet, and Buddhist monk says in his book *Creating True Peace* that “all of us can practice nonviolence. We begin by recognizing that, in the depths of our consciousness, we have both the seeds of compassion and the seeds of violence.” Everyone, at one time or another, can experience feelings of anger, fear, insecurity, and the pain of being disrespected. Our deep emotional and psychological wounds harbor those seeds of which Hanh spoke and, when tended and watered, they become the root of all the violence out there.<sup>83</sup>

Hurt people hurt others. And very often, hurt people hurt themselves, as well. For some, the wounds are so deep that it may seem to them that the only outlets for their anger, rage, or frustration are putting a fist through a wall or, worse yet, a bullet into someone’s head, or engaging in any of a wide range of self-destructive behaviors. Truly, those of us who are peacebuilders-in-training cannot bring healing and wholeness to a hurting world if we have not yet found our own inner healing. If we want peace “out there,” we must make the decision again and again to actively seek peace and happiness within. Imagine what the world would be like if every adult reset the compass of our lives and were guided by kindness and compassion in all that we did?

In order for us to begin to counteract and heal the violence that exists in our communities and in the world, we must become aware of the painful places within ourselves that harbor those seeds of violence. Anger can arise from many different sources: e.g., from feelings of helplessness, feelings of powerlessness, perceived and real discrimination, poverty, and other challenging and humiliating life circumstances. Anger can also be the result of acts of violence and anger directed toward us at any point in our lives. Over time and without intervention, this cycle of violence and anger can take a huge toll on our overall health and well-being; and our capacity for experiencing deep satisfaction, happiness, joy, and peace.

Just before graduating from seminary in 1988, I would learn that I harbored a seed of violence that was as destructive as anger. Suddenly, I lost the hearing in my right ear, and after a series of tests I received a mis-diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Not one of the seven University of Chicago physicians or other health professionals who examined, tested, probed, and cat-scanned me ever asked, “What’s going on in your life?”

The symptoms I experienced were my body’s way of sending me an unmistakable message which prompted me to do some serious self-reflection about what was *really* going on in my life. I realized I was totally stressed out! At that moment, I gained a healthy respect for what stress could do to my body, and I immediately began to explore ways to begin to turn things around. I evaluated the situations and the people in my life, and took appropriate action to either “edit or delete!” I became deeply curious about the ways my faith in God’s healing power, combined with yoga, progressive relaxation, meditation, and commitment to live in the present moment could help reduce my stress and empower me to live a healthier, more peace-filled life. That was the beginning of my interest in and commitment to learning as much as I could about holistic health and the mind, body, spirit connection.

Over the next year I became a certified yoga instructor, modified my diet, and began exploring Eastern meditation practices. My life changed for the better, and I am still reaping the benefits of those practices to this day.

As I began to research stress-reduction techniques, I discovered the work that Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, began in 1979, when he started the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program as a pilot project at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The participants in his eight-week course were referred by physicians and other healthcare providers for help coping with all kinds of illnesses—heart disease, cancer, AIDS, chronic pain, irritable bowel syndrome, skin problems, and chronic anxiety and panic—among other diagnoses. Since his stress-reduction program was based on the principles and practices of Buddhist meditation, he wondered if people would come to his program for help.

But it's now forty years later, and the practice of mindfulness has gained worldwide acceptance because studies show that people who practice mindfulness experience a reduction in symptoms; and they tend to become more accepting of themselves and their limitations; more confident in their ability to handle physical and emotional pain; and less anxious, depressed, and angry. They are able to handle the entire range of life experiences much more skillfully.

Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness this way: “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of the present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation.”<sup>84</sup>

Chronic stress is the result of unrelenting assaults on our mind, body, and spirit, and can cause serious problems such as headaches, muscle aches and pains, sleeplessness, and eating disorders—to name a few. When stress is high and we are not functioning at our best, our inability to deal with life's daily demands creates the conditions for violence to be directed “out there” or inward toward ourselves—or both! When stress is not managed well, many of us turn to negative ways of trying to cope. We overeat, drink too much alcohol, use illegal drugs, abuse prescription drugs, and engage in risky sexual behaviors. These are just a few of the ways that we “water the seeds of violence” within ourselves.

“Because the roots of toxic stress lie deep in the nervous system, we need tools that go beyond the conceptual mind to directly target that system. To transform our habitual responses, we need to regularly practice our skills when we are not in ‘fight-flight-freeze mode.’”<sup>85</sup>

Practicing mindfulness was a health-saving vehicle for me at a time when highly trained doctors didn't have a clue about what was wrong with me. If I had followed the path of traditional medicine, I would no doubt eventually have been prescribed medication for a disease that I didn't have. Mindfulness was free, effective, and without side effects. Misconceptions about the practice of mindfulness meditation, as well as knee-jerk reactions to the term, can serve as unfortunate barriers to folks in the Black community having access

to unconventional approaches that can lead to stress reduction, calm, emotional balance, impulse control, focus, resilience, heartfulness, and compassion.

One important thing to remember is that mindfulness is not a religion. While it is true that mindfulness meditation has its roots in Eastern spirituality, mindfulness is a secular practice that has no connection to any established religion or deity. Mindfulness and prayer are not religions but practices that can help us move through life with a greater sense of awareness, purpose, grounding, and connectedness.

Ten years ago at the invitation of a colleague, I developed a program called Creating Circles of Peace, in response to the pervasive gang violence in the African American community of Roseland on the South Side of Chicago. My vision was that we would provide a safe place for adults, parents, and parents-to-be, regardless of faith tradition, to gather together to think, pray, and “hold space” for each other as we shared our stories and our feelings about how violence had impacted our lives. After all, how could we ask our youth to stop the violence if we hadn’t yet done the inner work necessary to heal the wounds from our own experiences of violence?”

In order for us to create circles of peace we must first shine the light of inquiry on our inner conflicts, because this is the only place where we can truly effect change. As we become more peaceable, members of our families will experience a new environment of calm and respect. And, as individual members of our families become happier and more respectful to each other, that will manifest in healthier communities where cooperation and respect are the order of the day. The desired result will be healthy, loving communities contributing in their own ways to peace in the world.

My hope was that along with other components of my program, mindfulness could be introduced as a way to help create and maintain an environment of peace and resilience in the lives of Roseland residents despite the extremely challenging and seemingly hopeless conditions under which they lived.

Unfortunately, my program went nowhere. To this day, I wonder if the local pastor in charge of the various peace initiatives in that community rejected my program because he saw the word meditation as heresy opposed to his Christian principles and practices. That kind of close-minded, fear-based response serves only to limit the possibilities of greater collective peace, health, and wholeness.

The pastor’s rejection of a practice that had helped me so tremendously was a wake-up call that *semantics matter*! It suddenly became clear why those involved in the work of mindfulness in this country almost forty years ago began to secularize the practice by dropping the word *meditation*. As a result of the secularization, a gradual shift in perception has swung the door open for millions of everyday folk and professionals around the world in fields such as education, business, medicine, sports, psychology, and, yes, even religion, to reap enormous benefits from the practice of mindfulness.

Just as in the Roseland community in Chicago ten years ago, today, there are thousands upon thousands of mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles and grandparents and other caretakers in communities of color who deal with the seemingly never-ending struggles of

daily life, which result in unbelievable stressors adversely affecting their minds, bodies, and spirits.

Unfortunately, adults are not the only ones adversely affected. Too many of our children are troubled and traumatized! And, not only do our Black and Brown children have to deal with adversity at home, but they also experience overt and covert racism at school—or at the very least cultural insensitivity on the part of teachers who may be ignorant of the circumstances of our kids' lives. Their hardships, difficulties, and dangerous surroundings affect not only their ability to focus and learn but their very ability to act in socially responsible and acceptable ways in the school environment and toward their peers.

Cynthia Mendoza, of [brownmamas.com/](http://brownmamas.com/), writes: “A report in *Social Science & Medicine* says that young people who experience racism or racist treatment are more likely to struggle with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety both as children and later as teens. The lead researcher in that report stated that ‘the review showed there are strong and consistent relationships between racial discrimination and a range of detrimental health outcomes such as low self-esteem, reduced resilience, increased behavior problems and lower levels of well-being.’”<sup>86</sup>

All of these factors make it extremely hard for a child growing in poverty to achieve academic and social success. That is not to say that success in school or life is impossible. It does mean, however, that educators and parents must take specific actions to help their less-advantaged students fulfill their potential.<sup>87</sup>

Many of our children are angry and don't know why; or if they know why, they have no idea what to do with those emotions. Mindfulness gives them a way to become aware of those emotions, to be told that it is okay to have angry emotions, and then to practice putting space between feeling those emotions and reacting to them in ways that won't cause harm to themselves or others. We've all heard the phrase, “Take a deep breath before you do something you'll regret!” If you've ever followed that sage advice, you were practicing mindfulness!

So, the question is, what tools and strategies do we need to provide to our children to help them deal with the effects of all the stressful things that are going on around them at home, at school, and elsewhere?

Megan Cowan, cofounder of Mindful Schools, writes, “Just as it is good for children to move to expend and release energy, it is also good for them to practice stillness. It supports focus, self-awareness and impulse control. When children deliberately sit in stillness and don't respond to every urge to move, they are building the critical skills of body regulation, resilience and choice around when to act and when not to.”<sup>88</sup>

Without specific instruction in cultivating resilience, focus, and body regulation, our Black and Brown kids cope with what life has thrown at them in the only ways they know how: with resistance, anger, and rage; by acting out, disrespecting adults, bullying peers, joining gangs, doing drugs, and worse. They deserve more from us! Just as they are taught reading, writing, and arithmetic, our children need and deserve social-emotional intervention at the earliest possible age. We owe them intentional and consistent instruction and support in

developing social skills, in learning to recognize and accept their emotions, and in training their minds not to react to every situation or internal or external stimulus. This is not psychobabble. These are serious survival tools.

Knowing their history is certainly another critical part of their training. They need to learn from role models whose lives speak to the incredible things that a trained and disciplined mind can accomplish. For example, Nelson Mandela, one of the most well-known and beloved leaders of South Africa, and an enduring model of resilience, named this poem from the Victorian era as one of the elements that helped him survive twenty-seven years in prison.<sup>89</sup>

### **Invictus**<sup>90</sup>

*by William Ernest Henley*

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

As Peter Maxwell notes, “According to people closest to him, Mandela often recited this poem from memory when he felt low or lost. During his long incarceration, whenever he was permitted, he wrote and reread this piece of literature to boost his spirit, and to keep his mind active. He shared this poem with his fellow inmates whenever possible.”

Pema Chödrön offers this insight: “Meditation is about seeing clearly the body that we have, the mind that we have, the domestic situation that we have, the job that we have, and the people who are in our lives. It’s about seeing how we react to all these things. It’s seeing our emotions and thoughts just as they are right now, in this very moment, in this very room,



on this very seat. It's about not trying to make them go away, not trying to become better than we are, but just seeing clearly with precision and gentleness."<sup>91</sup> The perpetuation in the Black community of the stigma around Eastern-inspired rituals is not in our best interest emotionally, physically, or spiritually. Learning to be in the present moment via mindfulness practices can help adults as well as children put critical space between anger and potentially negative responses to that emotion, and can mitigate the devastating effects of stress on our bodies—as evidenced by the well-documented work of John Kabat-Zinn and anecdotally by myself, my clients, and many others in the mindfulness community.

Mindfulness strategies taught very early in life could have important implications for African American individuals, families, and communities if those strategies are taught very early in life. What are murder, rape, and robbery but anger, hopelessness, desperation, and bullying—on steroids? Believe me, I am not ignorant of the reality that many factors contribute to the hurtful and horrific behaviors in some people; but what we are talking about here is offering additional tools to help everyone in communities of color to better cope with the stresses of life, and we are offering options for responses other than violence to oneself or others.

One of the most important things I've done with my retirement time and energy has been to work at an elementary school in Indianapolis as an instructional assistant in a special education classroom. We are an International Baccalaureate School—kindergarten through fifth grade—serving a racially and culturally diverse population. Our entire school district is very supportive of neuroscience education for staff and of social-emotional learning practices for our kids. My awesome and supportive principal didn't hesitate to give me the go-ahead when I approached her about teaching the Mindful Schools Curriculum after I had completed the six-week online course.

Mindfulness has consistently gained traction over the last decade as a way to teach our children strategies that help them to become more focused, calm, and able to make better decisions. And school administrators have become more aware through cultural responsiveness and implicit bias trainings that they need to change their perspectives and approaches to the behaviors and attitudes of our Black and Brown children. They need to find responses other than school suspensions, which, in many school districts occur for Black and Brown children at rates three to four times higher than their state's average for all students.<sup>92</sup>

Last semester I offered the Mindful Schools Curriculum to a class of thirty fourth graders and to a class of twenty-eight kindergartners. In our twice-weekly, sixteen-session Mindful Schools series, I taught the children to make the connection that mindfulness can help them to be more aware of their emotions, their physical indicators and their responses to various emotions. With each session, we increased our time of silent mindful breathing—starting at thirty seconds and working our way up to five minutes. All the while we were training the mind to focus on the breath, which is our base or anchor to the present moment. We also practiced mindfulness in areas of our daily life: e.g., eating, walking, seeing, listening, and interacting with kindness and compassion with friends on the playground. The children also practiced mindful responses to seeing someone being bullied and to being bullied

themselves.

After just eight weeks, I observed that these students had a greater awareness, understanding, and ability to practice generosity, heartfulness, gratitude, kindness and caring on the playground, deep breathing, and mindful sitting. These practices are foundational to helping them develop focus, impulse control, and resilience. I also find it incredibly rewarding and fun to teach mindfulness to our kiddos on the autism spectrum. Of course they have varying capacities for stillness and quiet, but it is amazing what can happen with consistent practice and with no expectations of them to perform, achieve, or master anything—just to accept whatever appears in the present moment.

I have been inspired by our students to resurrect, renew, and refine my once-rejected Creating Circles of Peace program. (Delayed doesn't mean denied!) It is now called SuperKids for Peace. I am currently teaching the principles of peacebuilding in a third-grade classroom of twenty students—and they look forward with enthusiasm to our mindful time together twice a week. We will cover the following topics in our sessions over a sixteen-week period:

- Cultivating a Mindful Body
- Mindful Listening
- Sharing Mindfulness with My Family
- Twelve Qualities of a SuperKid for Peace
- Giving and Receiving Compliments
- Developing Resilience
- Getting in Touch with Emotions
- Inclusion and Being Your Best Self
- Kindness and Compassion
- SuperKids for Peace Affirmation and Peace Pledge
- Our Class Peace Project

Every topic is designed to teach peacebuilding through the lens and practice of mindfulness.

The question for some in this discussion might be, shouldn't we train our Black and Brown children to be warriors in the fight against discrimination and institutional racism, against those who blatantly, and without consequences, defy the truth that Black Lives Matter? Won't mindfulness make them soft at a time when we need to be angry for the cause?

The civil rights movement was led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a man of incredible resilience and resolve who spoke of love and peace, and who embraced the path of nonviolent resistance. His approach demonstrated that anger at racial injustice and inequality could be channeled into productive and effective avenues for change. Resilience and nonviolence are qualities that can be cultivated, developed, and strengthened through challenging experiences mediated by conscious mindfulness practice. Hot tempers,



competition, grasping, and trash-talking have had their chance. It's a new day, and there's a powerful movement afoot. Its name is mindfulness.

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[82.](#) Ps 34:14 (NRSV).

[83.](#) Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*, 1–2.

[84.](#) Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, 4.

[85.](#) “Why Mindfulness Is Needed in Education.”

[86.](#) Mendoza, “Mindful Meditation Should Be Required for Black Kids.”

[87.](#) See Jensen, *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*.

[88.](#) Cowan, “Role of Stillness in Mindfulness.”

[89.](#) Maxwell, “How Did Nelson Mandela Survive 27 years in Prison?”

[90.](#) Henley, “Invictus” (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>).

[91.](#) Chödrön, *Wisdom of No Escape*, 16.

[92.](#) Loveless, “Racial Disparities in School Suspensions.”