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Confessions of a mind-wandering MBSR student: remembering social amnesia

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Based upon a first-person experience of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, this article provides a critical reflection on this clinical intervention within the context of late capitalist society. It draws inspiration from Russell Jacoby's critique of contemporary psychology, what he referred to as 'social amnesia', a form of collective forgetting, manifesting as a tendency to repress, forget, and exclude the larger social, historical, and political context of therapeutic interventions. With its fetishization of the present moment, MBSR is predicated on a politics of subjectivity that assumes stress is localized to the failure of the individual to regulate their emotions.

Keywords: Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR); stress; present moment; mindfulness; social amnesia

A saving grace

After my article 'Beyond McMindfulness' (with David Loy) went viral in the *Huffington Post* in July 2013 (Purser & Loy, 2013), a number of clinicians and advocates of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) began to question whether I (along with others who started asking critical questions) had any first-hand experience of this program. I should note that the article questioned whether corporate mindfulness programs were being co-opted, utilized mainly as a low-cost palliative for reducing stress, helping employees become more focused, productive, and disciplined – in effect, to become better adjusted to the corporate status quo. Clinical mindfulness programs were not targeted in this critique. Nevertheless, while I had done a great deal of research on MBSR, along with closely observing how mindfulness programs were making inroads into various sectors of society – mindfulness in schools, corporations, the military, and government – I could not speak from any first-person experience of having taken an eight-week MBSR course.

To put these concerns to rest, I eventually enrolled on an MBSR course at a local hospital. Our MBSR teacher was a stocky and bald-headed man of few words. As with most new group endeavors, the atmosphere of the introductory session was palpably awkward and guarded. I knew ahead of time from reading about MBSR that I would soon be facing the initiation rite into this form of mindfulness practice, the slow eating of a raisin, an exercise that I was honestly not looking forward to doing. Being a good sport, I summoned what reservoirs of patience I had in my account, gazed attentively at the raisin for a few seconds (naturally, it was organic),

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and took a small nibble. I've been to foodie meccas in Italy – Parma, Bologna, Reggio Emilia – so the ritual of slow eating was not new; but whether I was mindfully eating or not, it's hard to say.

Over the next few weeks I began to gain a much deeper appreciation of how MBSR was responding to a deep longing in Western culture, and how this method, course, or whatever you want to call it, was serving some unmet needs of late capitalist society. I felt a little out of place. Twenty-five or so participants were on the MBSR course; the majority were women. As we went around the room and everyone introduced themselves, explaining what brought them there, I felt like I was listening to the walking wounded. Many had suddenly lost their jobs without warning. Others were there because of the stresses and strains of having to work long hours, sometimes two jobs, while still attending to their care-taking and family obligations. Divorces, bereavements, stories of chronic pain, and a vague sense of malaise haunted the room. And nearly half of the participants had been referred by their psychotherapists. Clearly, MBSR was a saving grace for these people, especially since most had never encountered, nor been exposed to, meditation or mindfulness practice. For a number of women, this was their second and third round of taking an MBSR course. In just a few short weeks, people were already describing the innumerable benefits they were receiving from practicing the 'body scan' exercise, some even reporting that it was conducive to better sleep. The MBSR teacher was certainly sincere and competent. The course was accomplishing exactly what it was intended to do: teach people how to reduce their stress and anxiety, cope with pain, and live a more mindful life. Then why was I unsettled and experiencing a vague sense of irritation? Why was I restless, bothered?

Was it because mindfulness was presented without an ethical framework? Not really. As far as I could tell, there were no serial killers or cut-throat 26-year-old über executives among us. And I had taken a few meditation courses before at Buddhist Insight Meditation Centers, and ethics were not on their agenda either. That wasn't the issue. I briefly came back to my senses, as the MBSR instructor led us in a guided sitting meditation. Minutes into the exercise, I had a flashback, or what is now referred to as 'mind-wandering' – sort of the opposite of MBSR present-moment awareness.

Industrial reveries

Disregarding the instructions to be in the present moment, I decide to indulge the memory, at least a little. I am back to being 18, working as an industrial electrician at one of the largest manufacturing plants on Chicago's South Side. Suited in overalls, with a beat-up, red hard-hat on over long hair, I am anxiously staring at the time clock with everyone else in a group ritual of silence, waiting for the minute hand to strike three so I can punch out. In front of me are hunched-over workers – a few pipe fitters who have punched this time clock for the last 30 years of their lives. But on this day, my gaze shifts from the minute hand on the time clock to the faces of alienation in front of me. Wait a minute. These faces are not all that dissimilar to the first impressions and looks of defeat I saw just weeks earlier in my MBSR cohort – the vacant stares, the pained faces, the anxious waiting for time to change. This past was the present, appearing in a different way. Being a bad MBSR student, I began ruminating further. What about *these* walking wounded? Would MBSR have helped

them, too, if it had been around back in the day? Would they have stopped punching the time clock if they took a mindfulness course? Would MBSR have helped them to be more mindful at work, allowing them to appreciate and enjoy the routine and monotony of the assembly line? Could they have afforded an MBSR course? Perhaps the animosity and strained labor-management relations, along with the militant labor unions, would have all become obsolete if corporate mindfulness training had been available?

That was a little too much thinking; I brought myself back to the present moment. After our sitting meditation, the MBSR teacher excitedly passed round photocopies of 'The Mindful Revolution' (Picket 2014) – the feature story in *Time* magazine (depicted with the image of a youthful white blonde woman with eyes blissfully closed on the cover). But as I gazed across the room, this image of spiritual perfection just didn't jibe with the atmosphere. If this was the face and the icon of the mindful revolution, it wasn't happening here. Instead, I had become even more mindful of the faces of alienation, the forlorn, the weary, as well as bodies that had been beaten down by the daily grind, minds numbed by the incessant demands of a 24/7 digital economy. As the course progressed, my gnawing sense of unease did not abate. In fact, it got worse.

Yet, at the same time, I could see why MBSR had become a refuge for so many. These people were suffering from a wide range of stress-related symptoms, but the good news was that since they were responsible for their own suffering, such stress could be alleviated by practicing mindfulness – by paying attention to the present moment, non-judgmentally. Letting go of thoughts of the past and future, just 'being' rather than 'doing', attending mindfully to the present moment – this dominant conception of mindfulness has had an enormous cultural resonance, addressing some deep longing in late capitalist society. It is a powerfully seductive proposition: stress is localized within the subjective domain of the individual, caused by too much thinking (or what clinicians now call 'mental ruminations') about the past and future. If the causes of stress are located inside my own head, from my own lack of emotional self-regulation, from my habitual patterns of thinking – and the neuroscience of MRI images seems to suggests this is all happening inside my brain – then my misery must be self-created. I only have myself – my own mindlessness – to blame for my own suffering.

Magical voluntarism

This persuasive and dominant narrative just didn't sit right with me. While people were getting temporary relief from MBSR, as time went on I had a hard time differentiating whether I was being educated in a scientific, evidenced-based method or a political ideology. Perhaps it was both. However, the etiological explanation sounded just a little too convenient – the stress people were experiencing supposedly had nothing to do with their actual material conditions (e.g. loss of income), nor the unreasonable demands placed on them by toxic, workaholic, corporate cultures. The noxious features of neoliberal capitalism were nowhere to be found on the mindfulness radar. Instead, stress was explained as being a private, subjective, and interior affair – a problem for which individuals needed to take responsibility on their own. Clinical psychologist David Smail (2005, p. 7) refers to this philosophy as 'magical voluntarism', where the burden and locus of both psychological distress

and change entirely depends on the will (or, now we might say, the mindfulness) of the individual.

Reflecting on this self-responsibility ethos, I began to feel a sense of *déjà vu*. As a young, idealistic undergraduate student of Humanistic Psychology at Sonoma State University in northern California in the late 1970s, I was studying the works of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, existentialists, depth psychologists, and other human potential gurus. Werner Erhard's EST seminars were all the rage at the same time when the Thatcher–Reagan neoliberal policies were gaining prominence. Feeling all self-righteous having jumped ship from a behavioral/experimental 'rat' psychology program in the Midwest, I enthusiastically drank the kool-aid that change, self-actualization, and transformation come from within – all within the power and agency of an autonomous subject. Self-mastery is a heroic journey of the individual. The promise of Humanistic Psychology, that liberation is a search for the farthest reaches of human nature – the authentic self – echoed to the future. Now one has to search no further than inside oneself. By practicing mindfulness, authenticity can now be had by shifting from the 'doing' to the 'being' mode. Of course, it's a tad hard to be authentic and hang out in the 'being' mode if you are executing trades on Wall Street 60 hours a week, but that's why taking time out for de-stressing, unplugging, and having a daily meditation practice is highly recommended.

I tried to stay in the present moment, I really did, but this forbidden mind-wandering seemed to be leading somewhere, connecting the dots, yielding a couple of brief 'ah-ha' moments. First, it became clear to me that both Humanistic Psychology and the contemporary mindfulness movement have made subjectivity sacrosanct. Secondly, both eschew any need to pay attention to social and historical contexts of distress, to power structures and monetary interests, or how the therapeutic-mindfulness industry may itself amount to a conformist psychology – complicit in maintaining the status quo of corporate capitalism and the neoliberal state (Jacoby, 1997; Smail, 2005).

I felt conflicted. Here I was, sitting in a community of strangers who were all suffering in their own ways, battered down by the vicissitudes of modern life. Each week I was watching and listening and observing how MBSR was helping them cope, offering them the tools so that they could adjust to their less than ideal circumstances at work, even building up their resilience. How could anyone be critical of such beneficence? To do so would seem to be making the perfect the enemy of the good. And there was much good happening in MBSR. At the same time, I knew that in a few weeks the MBSR class would come to an end, and these folks would soon be back in the trenches and in the firing line of corporate life, still contending with grueling hours in their cubicles, or for some, pounding the pavements in search of employment – basic survival. Yes, hopefully the skills they learned over the course of eight weeks will help them cope a little better. But these observations were fueling the gnawing sensation of unease in my gut. Was this so-called 'Mindful Revolution' all about coping, becoming a better adjusted cog, fine-tuning our brains so that we can dutifully perform our roles in a more efficient manner – greasing the wheels of the capitalist machinery? Could it be that mindfulness has been embraced by the mainstream because it ensures a snug fit between individuals and social institutions, a useful accomplice in maintaining social control by regulating our unruly desires, shunning thinking, and by learning to

accept the given by retreating into the comfortable depths of subjectivity? Is this flight to direct sensory experience of the present moment void of judgment (slowly eating a raisin, taking a deep breath before sending off that difficult e-mail, etc.), propagating a sophisticated form of anti-intellectualism, throwing us a few breadcrumbs of stability at the expense of mindlessly accepting things as they are?

Reductive narratives

By now some may think I am suggesting throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I am not. The walking wounded – those with chronic stress is similar to childhood obesity, black lung disease, or victims of industrial accidents – conditions which still need to be treated, and MBSR admirably serves its intended purpose in this regard. But what is missing in this picture, and in the mindfulness discourse in particular, is that chronic stress, like most chronic diseases and occupational accidents, has a social and political content. Such insights are not new. Eric Fromm (1944), who himself launched a critique of the orthodox psychoanalysis of his day, pointed out that our distress and anxieties can never be fully understood nor alleviated if the social origins of suffering are ignored. One of the main reasons mindfulness programs have gained enormous acceptance by psychologists, clinicians, and administrators is because they resonate so strongly with, and even give stronger credence to, the therapeutic ideology of magical voluntarism – which conveniently ignores historical and material conditions, tending toward a mystification of the social environment. Social suffering and the actual material conditions of misery are concealed by therapeutic discourse, whether via the reductive explanatory narratives of psychologism or biologism: psychic and mental disturbances are depoliticized, promulgating an exclusively atomistic and individualistic view of human distress.

The underlying premise is that individuals suffering from stress-related disorders are dysfunctional, while the material conditions of the corporation and socio-economic structures of late capitalist society are considered a given, normal, and off limits from critical investigation. Joel Kovel (1980) has gone so far as to say that the American mental health industry has proliferated and grown exponentially, not because of any conclusive evidence, accumulative scientific progress, or mastery over mental illness and psychological disorders, but because the diagnoses of individual disorders and their treatments are part of the same social process. Moreover, Kovel claims that the therapy/mental health industry has been handsomely rewarded because of its institutional role in smoothing over and masking the growing contradictions of advanced capitalist societies. Kovel's observations are worth noting:

> Viewed in this light, then, the rise of a purely psychological view of human difficulties is a handy way of mystifying social reality, and it requires no feat of imagination to comprehend capitalist society would come to reward the psychiatric profession for promoting a special kind of psychological illusion. (Kovel, 1980, p. 73)

With corporations reporting over $300 billion in losses annually due to stress-related diseases and absences, it should come as no surprise that mindfulness is now estimated to be a $4 billion industry (and, I might add, $9.2 billion for the Positive Psychology industry).

Undesirable attitudes

Next on the agenda, the MBSR teacher announces, is 'mindful movement and yoga'. Being more of a Tai Chi practitioner, I decided to sit this one out, but I am again struck by the demographics; most of the participants in the class are women, and much of the popular literature on mindfulness is highly gendered. As I take advantage of the supine pose, I am reminded of Elton Mayo's famous relay room experiments with six women at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works plant that took place in the 1920s. Western Electric industrial engineers were intent on isolating the effects of rest periods on productivity via tangible changes in procedure that they could easily introduce into the rest of the plant. When Western Electric researchers began to come under Mayo's influence, they were eventually swayed into thinking that the productivity increases were due to improved 'mental attitudes' of the women. Elton Mayo's work and 'findings' led to the faddish Human Relations movement in industry. Mayo was trained as a psychiatrist. His interpretations of experimental data and observations continually discounted the workers' interpretations and perspective. Particularly in the case of the relay test room, Mayo attributed the women's complaints and interpretations as mere 'emotional reactions' that shouldn't be taken seriously. His theory of psychopathology reduced workers' complaints about working conditions in industry to their personal problems and social maladjustment, not to any real objective conditions.

In his book *Manufacturing Knowledge* (1991), Richard Gillespie provides a rich narrative account of the Hawthorne experiments based on original archival data. Noting Mayo's bias, Gillespie states that there is '[a] persistent tendency in Mayo's work to transform any challenge by workers of managerial control into evidence of psychiatric disturbance' (1991, p. 73). By this time, a massive interviewing program was already underway in the Hawthorne plant. Over a three-year period, the Harvard team – along with a trained staff of some 300 people – interviewed in confidence all 21,000 of the plant's workers. Mayo surmised that interviews could serve as therapeutic devices that helped the worker to gain insight into his or her 'personal situation', and thereby change their 'undesirable' attitude or behavior. Interviews helped employees to feel that management cared about their opinions and concerns. This was especially pertinent when employees were emotionally reactive, angry, and voicing various grievances. Subsequently, employees began to talk about how the conditions in the plant were improving, even if nothing had really changed; in fact, the interviewers had no power or charge to change the problematic conditions identified by employees.

The parallels here are hard to ignore. Both the Human Relations and corporate mindfulness movements share an affinity by relegating conflicts, emotional reactivity, employee discontent, and alleged employee dysfunction to subjective and psychological conditions. Both share in continuing and recasting the Puritan obsession with emotional control, especially anger, in new psychological and neuroscientific garb (Illouz, 2008). The labels for dysfunction change over time – immaturity, hysteria, nervous breakdowns, lack of emotional intelligence, problems of emotional self-regulation, mindlessness – but the fundamental therapeutic ideology, based on the cult of subjectivity, remains constant.

Social amnesia

Popular therapeutic movements (and it is quite ironic, because we are speaking now of the *mindfulness* movement) require a collective form of *forgetting* – what Russell Jacoby (1997) has characterized as 'social amnesia'. A key element in social amnesia is the (Marxist) concept of *reification* which maintains a social illusion that the status quo, the social context, the institutional structures of society, are natural, taken for granted, deemed unchangeable – the myth of the given. One way such collective forgetting has been facilitated is through a revisioning of mindfulness as being focused on the present moment – where thinking about the past and future (or just plain thinking) are considered distractions and detrimental to the practice of just 'being' (of course, in the here-and-now). This is despite the fact that the etymological meaning of mindfulness within its original Buddhist context was derived from the Pali word *sati*, conveying memory or remembrance, and the verb *sarati*, meaning 'to remember' (Rhys Davids, 1877; Stanley, in press). Modern secular mindfulness, with its fetishization of the present moment, may be the most powerful dynamic accelerating social amnesia – 'a forgetting and repression of the human and social activity that makes and can remake a society' (Jacoby, 1997, p. 4).

There are different ways of thinking about a fetish. One meaning, along the lines of Marx's notion, is that a fetish keeps people fixated on or fascinated by an unreal object that keeps them from seeing the truth. The original meaning of fetish seems to be derived from the Portuguese, from the word *feitiço*, connoting a charm or sorcery, referring to talismans in the Middle Ages that were considered heretical (Pietz, 1985, p. 6). The modern meaning of fetish as a term to describe the religious practice of worshipping objects originated in the work of Charles de Brosses, whose writings Marx was familiar with (Dant, 1996; Pietz, 1993). By the nineteenth century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, fetish took on its broad cultural meanings, being defined as 'something irrationally reverenced' (Dant, 1996, p. 500).

Dant's explanation of the mystifying effects of a fetish is worth considering at length.

> A fetish is created through the veneration or worship of an object that is attributed some power or capacity, independently of its manifestation of that capacity. However, through the very process of attribution the object may indeed manifest those powers; the specialness with which the object is treated makes it special. The fetish object will, for example, influence the lives of its human worshippers, determining some of their actions and modifying their beliefs. In this process the object is mediating the powers delegated to it by worshippers. As with all mediation, the fetish is not merely reflecting back the ideas and beliefs of its worshippers, it is transforming them – or, in the language of actor-network theory, 'translating' them. (Callon, 1991)

In this respect, there may be a strong link between the political quietism of the mindfulness movement and its fetishizing of the present moment. If mindfulness is reduced to simply being in the present moment, I could be mindful of my experience but still be completely unaware of all the causes and conditions that have constructed my experience. If I am feeling resentful, exploited, and stressed out at work, and I am instructed to simply turn to the present moment, what good will that do in changing those very conditions that have contributed to why I am feeling so agitated? Retreat into watching the breathing, let go of thoughts and emotions, and settle into a non-judgmental attitude. Just be in the present moment. Just pay

attention to one thing at a time. The present moment is imbued with a magical power to assuage, heal, and tolerate. Inquiry, critical thought, or investigation into the regime of experience yields and surrenders to the personal. It is the immediacy of the personalized/subjectivized present moment, the here-and-now, that banishes thoughts – instilling an immediacy that stills reflection (Jacoby, 1997).

In many respects, this injunction to 'rise above' all the turmoil of human and social experience into a detached perch of non-judgmental objectivity resembles the Stoics' goal of *apatheia* – from which the modern meaning of apathy is derived (Payne, 2014). No doubt this prescription offers a nice respite from a boss threatening to fire me. But this is a little like watching a sleight of hand artist: you watch carefully, mindfully, because you don't want to be tricked, but you don't know what to look for, so you get fooled yet again.

Mindfulness and passive humanism

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR, equates this state of immersion in the non-discriminating here-and-now to 'not-knowing' (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). It is a retreat into, as Kabat-Zinn describes it, a 'body-centered field of awareness that doesn't have to have a narrative or doesn't have to believe its own narrative or take it seriously. It's more in what you could call a domain of not-knowing' (ibid.). He then provides an illustrative example of how this state of not-knowing served him well in his encounter with a homeless beggar on the street:

> I was walking by somebody who was panhandling, and that happens a lot where I happen to be at the moment, but he wasn't actually panhandling. He didn't say anything. I just passed him by. But there was something about the feeling of moving past him that I felt like I did not want to pass him by. So I went back and put some money in the cup that he had there and he said, 'Thank you'. The way he had said 'thank you' had so much dignity in it. I mean, it has so much – I felt so badly for this guy.
>
> I mean, we're in such a bad economic situation that people are out there on the streets in so many different degrees of deprivation. And many of the people who panhandle are actually quite aggressive. But the way this person just said 'thank you', it just really moved me. And my impulse was to want to be his friend and give him more money and take him home. None of which I did. But there was that moment where I really saw this guy and it was its own thing. It didn't need another thing to happen. It was just a beautiful exchange. (Kabat-Zinn, 2006)

Yes, quite beautiful. Nothing further needed to happen, except to remain mindful of the present moment without judgment. The immediacy of the 'I–Thou' moment, as precious as it may have seemed, is a passive humanism that assumes that dispensing with all narratives will lead to the good. Such 'not-knowing', however, is to witness the effects of social amnesia – forgetting that the world is a narrative, and whose telling is contingent on power and interests, a social and political environment, and economic structures which have warmly embraced the mindfulness movement as the new opiate for the masses. The mindful movement exercises are over, and I realize that I have drifted off into a pleasant nap. But nobody around me is judgmental or seems to care, so I exit the room without embarrassment.

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