

## **Mindfulness and Moral Purpose: Exploring Connections**

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by

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### **Background on the Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program**

The work described in this manuscript is an outgrowth of efforts associated with The Liberty Hyde Bailey Scholars Program (henceforth called “Bailey”) at Michigan State University. Bailey is an interdisciplinary program located in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. It is organized as a 21-credit specialization and open to students across the university who self-select into the program. All program activities, including coursework, are learner envisioned and designed. Faculty members participate in Bailey as co-learners not as instructors.

Bailey’s purpose is to encourage whole-person development. To develop as whole persons, members explore answers to fundamental questions, such as: Who am I? What do I value? What is my worldview? How do I learn? How do these answers apply in my personal life and professional endeavors? It is understood that finding meaningful responses to intensely personal questions is enabled by personal reflection and authentic engagement in a community of learning. Because of that, Bailey is a “space” more than a program, where like-valued people (not all like-minded) explore issues of common interest.

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Bailey's organizational design is simple: members self-organize their learning experiences – from deciding which topics to learn, to determining how learning will be evaluated – with shared and collaborative leadership reflected throughout. Course and co-curricular experiences proceed that way.

The center of gravity in Bailey is the *learning journey*, the philosophy of which is captured demonstrably in the "Declaration of Bailey," the words of which hang in ticker-tape letters along the ceiling of the Bailey Commons, the main meeting room. The Declaration is a constant reminder of Bailey's intent to members and guests: "... to be a community of scholars dedicated to lifelong learning. All members of the community work toward providing a respectful, trusting environment where we acknowledge our interdependence and encourage personal growth."

Dialogue is the primary form of engagement in Bailey. People gather in the Bailey Commons and engage each other on topics of collective interest. These conversations are always purposeful but never directed. Somebody convenes the dialogue, frames the conversation, and invites others to participate. From that point, conversations go where they need to go depending on the perspectives and interests of those around the table.<sup>2</sup>

### Exploring Mindfulness and Moral Purpose through Dialogue

To prepare for the 2005 Institute, the authors of this manuscript organized a lunch session in the Bailey Commons and invited members of the community to participate in a discussion about mindfulness and moral purpose. To prepare for the luncheon, the authors met to discuss how to frame the dialogue. They began by talking about the concept of *mindfulness*, which has meaning to the Bailey community because it is a central concept in John Tagg's book, *The Learning College*.<sup>3</sup> Professor Tagg, who studied the Bailey program as background for writing his book, sees the development of mindfulness as a critical feature of the undergraduate experience:

To see the world mindfully is to see it with imagination, the faculty that permits us to see the unseen.... A deep approach to learning, fully realized, makes us mindful in precisely the sense of seeing things from more than one angle, turning them over and taking in what is new about them, coming to see them in a new light and in new categories.... This quality of variation is a key element of a deep approach to learning. And

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Bailey Scholars Program, see: Fear, F., Latinen, L., Woodward, D., & Gerulski, K. (2001). Fusing competence and character: Celebrating postmodern expressions in higher education. *The Journal of College and Character* <http://collegevalues.org/articles.cfmevalues.org/articles.cfm?id=373&a=1>; Fear, F., Doberneck, D., Robinson, C., Fear, K., & Barr, R. with Van Den Berg, H., Smith, J., and Petruilis, R. (2003). "Meaning making and 'The Learning Paradigm': A provocative idea in practice." *Innovative Higher Education* 27(3): 151-168; and Fear, F., & Doberneck, D. (2004). "Creating a space for collegial engagement: A powerful tool for change." *About Campus* 9(1):11-19.

<sup>3</sup> Tagg, J. 2003. *The Learning Paradigm College*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc.

it is the core of what educational institutions most urgently need to do.  
(pp. 76-78)

According to psychologist Ellen Langer, mindfulness includes the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and awareness of multiple perspectives.<sup>4</sup> The opposite of mindfulness – mindlessness – includes being trapped in existing categories; avoiding new possibilities; and holding to and operating from a single perspective. As psychologist David LaBerge sees it, being mindful requires paying attention, keeping the mind alert, and enhancing clarity and depth of understanding.<sup>5</sup> As we see it, being mindful is required for engaged learning – the form of learning practiced in Bailey – because it stimulates the desire to explore new ideas, participate in new learning opportunities, and take part in critique.

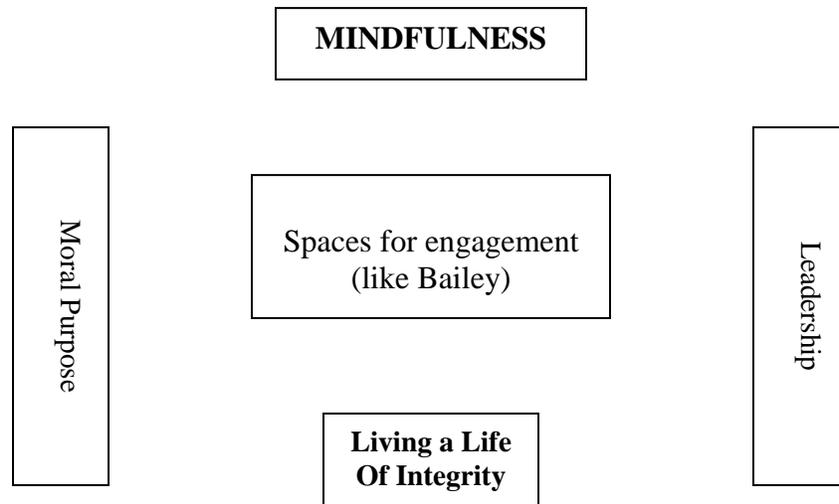
At issue, though, is this: *What is the connection between mindfulness (an intellectual activity) and moral purpose (a values-based stance)?* As we explored this question, it seemed to us that the ultimate end is living a life of integrity and purpose – to self, family, community, profession, and society. To do that, moral purpose (clarity and conviction of values) is required and resolve is measured by persistence of leadership, especially leadership exercised for the public good. To help us learn and grow, we need to participate in communities of practice – spaces populated by people of conviction – to nurture our spirit, hone our skills, and keep the flames of spirit burning brightly. All of this requires being mindfully engaged, that is, maintaining a close connection between core values and actions, as well as being open to new ideas, inviting different ways of thinking about things, and encouraging critique from others.

This led us to thinking about connections in graphic form and, also, to generating a series of questions for exploration with others during the lunch engagement.

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<sup>4</sup> Langer, E. 1989. *Mindfulness*. Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press.

<sup>5</sup> LaBerge, D. 1995. *Attentional processing: The brain's art of mindfulness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



1. Have you become more mindful as time has passed? If the answer is yes, please share examples. If the answer is no, explain why.
2. What is moral purpose? How, and in what ways, is mindfulness connected to moral purpose? Are you making the connection in your life? Share examples.
3. What is the essence of leadership? What does it mean to live a life with integrity?
4. Are mindfulness, moral purpose, and leadership connected? If so, are these connections necessary for living a life with integrity?
5. How, if at all, has Bailey contributed to your mindfulness? Your understanding of and commitment to moral purpose? Your understanding of leadership and your capacity to exercise it? Your ability to lead a life with integrity?

### **Outcomes of Bailey Dialogue on Mindfulness and Moral Purpose**

Approximately ten colleagues joined us in dialogue at the luncheon, which was held in January 2005, a few weeks before the Institute. We framed the conversation with background information shared here and then invited a response for those gathered. From that point forward, we became note-takers, documenting what colleagues had to share. Here is what they said.

#### **Recognition of Being Mindful**

There's often an "Ah ha!" with students when they realize they are being mindful, either about course material or about themselves. For example, when student scholars think about their lives in terms of the Bailey "Five questions," they are being mindful. In

class, students often say “Thank you!” to faculty members when they are encouraged to be mindful.

### **Understanding the Essence of its Meaning**

Is mindfulness different from critical thinking? We think it is. Critical thinking is an analytic act, the capacity to think through a matter thoroughly and logically, and to engage in critique. Mindfulness, which includes critical thinking, is a stance—as much a way of being as it is a way of knowing. Because the Academy values a rational mode of knowing, it values critical thinking. Nevertheless, other ways of knowing, particularly indigenous ways of knowing, are mindful ways of knowing. Understanding the difference between critical thinking and mindfulness enables us to associate the word “respectful” with mindfulness. You cannot be mindful unless you show respect for yourself and others.

### **How is Mindfulness Stimulated?**

One way is to stimulate mindfulness is to expand your comfort zone, to experience new things, and to surround yourself with new (and different) people. Doing that creates circumstances for developing mindfulness and for acting mindfully. When you are in new settings and interact with new and different people, you learn new things about yourself—important things—sometimes discovering what really makes you, you.

### **When you are Being Mindful, What Happens?**

One consequence of being mindful is that it can contribute to the maturation process. First, mindfulness stimulates an advanced way of thinking because you are less inclined to think in yes/no or in either/or terms and more likely to see shades of gray and variety of possibilities. Second, you are more likely to have empathy for people and circumstances. Put another way, contextual understanding influences how issues are understood. Third, you are better able to distinguish your own voice from the voices of others. With that, you are clearer about what you expect of yourself and are less inclined to define self-expectations in strictly others’ terms. Another consequence, one that is especially important, is you are less likely to be harshly judgmental and evaluative of matters, people, and circumstances. You are more likely to be understanding of others, learn from others, and incorporate that learning into your own perspective (to reinforce an existing perspective or to adjust your perspective). If one’s identity is the basis of personal integrity, then a consequence of being mindful is being more able to “feel comfortable within your own skin,” that is, recognizing who you really are and understanding (as well as valuing) your place in the world.

### **The Place of Mindfulness in Contemporary Society**

If anything, there seems to be a “dumbing down” of society, people seeking facile solutions to complex issues. People also seem more interested in acting quickly than in investing time, individually or collectively, in considering things mindfully. Because of

that, it is sometimes embarrassing (and there are often feelings of guilt) when more mindful people interact with less mindful people. Because mindful people often feel they need to apologize for thinking the way they do and leading the lives they live, they sometimes communicate in short-hand so as not to reveal the depth of their thinking or actions. For example, telling somebody “I’m going to graduate school” replaces “I’m involved in cancer research.”

### **How Can you Encourage Mindfulness?**

It is in this regard that we value the contribution of “mindful environments,” spaces where mindfulness is *valued and respected, endorsed and practiced, and affirmed and rewarded*. The issue for higher education is this: Are there cultures of engagement in colleges and universities? Of course, there are, but they are less likely to exist institution wide and more likely to form in institutional pockets, such as Bailey. Of critical importance is being able to engage in sustained conversations with others who are committed to mindful thought and action and, just as importantly, for those conversations to include abundant references to the life experiences of the people involved. Perhaps the biggest challenge, especially when engaging with those who are less mindfully inclined, is to understand and appreciate that plurality of ideas does not automatically dilute the search for “truth.” Rather than think and act in terms of absolute rights and wrongs, we need to seek understanding, that is, to be mindful of responsibilities, implications, consequences, and circumstances.

### **Dialogue at the Institute**

During our presentation at the Institute, we shared the material presented from our pre-lunch and lunch discussion and asked session participants to respond. We did that by replicating the Bailey luncheon experience, inviting those in the session to create a dialogue circle. Those engaged had this to offer:

#### **About Mindfulness**

- Mindfulness stimulates perceptiveness and encourages awareness.
- Being mindful is not just an act; it is a way of thinking and engaging, and can inspire people to be agents of change.
- Being mindful can help us become more conscious of issues, such as how issues are perceived by others.
- Mindfulness can help break down barriers. In noticing things, we pay attention to matters that otherwise might be overlooked.
- Mindfulness connects doing and reflecting, and reminds us that—in being mindful with others—we share values, not truths.

## About Dialogue

After the dialogue, we invited the participants to comment on their dialogic experience. They were quick to respond and offered these observations: it encourages independent thinking; nurtures personal processing; stimulates diverse perspectives; can build vibrant interpersonal connections; respects others' voices; values learning from each idea; and helps people trust emergence (especially when dialogue is un-facilitated as was the circumstance in this case).

As we reflected later that evening on the session experience, it seemed to us how natural this way of engaging is for some and how radical it seemed to be for others. We concluded that the form of engaged learning we practice in Bailey is like a "fine wine," that is, some people like it immediately; others do not care for it; and others might acquire a taste over time.

### **Connected Learning: Sharing the Institute Experience with the Bailey Community**

As is the common practice in Bailey, those who participate in conferences and other external learning experiences are encouraged to sharing their experiences after returning from the field. So, several weeks after the Institute we re-convened a second luncheon dialogue. After those assembled heard what we had to say about the Institute experience, they decided to organize the subsequent conversation around two questions: *How do we know what we know? Whose voice do we let count?*

As the dialogue unfolded with respect to the first question, the matter of reflection on experience loomed large. Students and faculty commented on how experience had provided them with a testing ground to sift and sort through information they had acquired from a variety of sources, including college. It was the mindful application of that information—paying attention to the realities of context—that helped them succeed, coupled with the opportunity to reflect on experience and learn from it. Rarely had they confronted situations where they could directly apply what they had been taught in formal educational settings. In fact, they found themselves drawing from a variety of experiences (e.g., a comment made in passing, something they had read for pleasure). The conclusion reached is that we learn all the time, even during situations not identified as such, and we need to be mindful of that.

The second question brought a more emotional response than an intellectual one, probably because people felt its touch deeply. On the one hand, the issues of confidence and independence were brought out as core issues when people explored these questions: *When should I trust my voice? Am I willing to trust my voice?* These questions delve into the very heart of what it means to "grow up" and establish a distinctive identity. Those around the table gave examples of how they first recognized that they had a voice and, with that, how they first exercised it—often as they confronted authority figures, parents most typically, and offered a contrary point of view. These were defining moments, even

though all of them did not go well, and a common theme was how important it was to “stand on one’s own two feet” by articulating and defending a point of view.

Many of the students said they are discovering how college life is helping them frame, if not define, their thinking. Because of that, they have found themselves in heated discussions, if not arguments, with family members and high school friends at home about matters that would not have been issues before college. This seems to be especially problematic for first-generation college-goers; and students who live in isolated communities or communities with a substantial number of long-time residents. Students said they learned quickly, sometimes through harsh experiences, when to speak up and when to remain silent.

It is one thing, they said, when the matter is interpersonal. It is another thing when the matter is institutional. What do you do and what do you say when your beliefs—often well-thought out and grounded in logic—are at odds with institutions you have supported in the past? The situation is compounded when others expect that support to continue and when they, themselves, support those institutions, albeit sometimes mindlessly. Church and state are prime examples. How to manage circumstances like these—common as they are—was a topic of robust discussion.

Related to this issue was the matter of how people work toward the ends they prefer and how those approaches compare with others’ approaches. There was an extended conversation about what “kids” often do: figuring out what they want and then “playing” people against each other to get it, typically one’s mother and father. Those gathered at lunch talked about relationships with adults who still act that way. Some wondered if people act immaturely because of temperament or, perhaps, by habit because acting that way had succeeded in the past. Others wondered whether this behavior is the unfortunate consequence of participating in less nurturing environments where voice is stifled, love is insufficiently expressed, hope is in short supply, and faith in self is restricted.

### **Conclusions**

Soon after the second Bailey dialogue, we (the authors) re-convened to talk about what had been learned about mindfulness and moral purpose from our multiple conversations in East Lansing and Tallahassee. We asked, “What conclusions do we reach?” First, we recognize how important it is—as an expression of our leadership—to nurture spaces for dialogue, especially spaces where diverse perspectives are invited and shared. Second, we believe that people can develop frameworks for themselves, frameworks that are personally meaningful, authentic, and mindful. Third, we understand and accept our role of helping others develop frameworks that are relevant for living lives of purpose and meaning.

We recognize how important it is to have the opportunity, freedom, and encouragement to establish and live a *self-authored life*. It is in that regard that we find great value in the words of Marcia Baxter Magolda:

Meeting societal expectations and making one's way into young adulthood are complex tasks. Taking on adult responsibilities, managing one's life effectively, and making informed decisions . . . require something beyond learning particular skills and acquiring particular behaviors. They require, instead, the "capacity for self-authorship"—the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments. Self-authorship is more than an acquired skill. As Robert Kegan explained, it requires complex ways of making meaning of our experience. . . . These expectations require self-authorship because they require the ability to construct our visions, to make informed decisions in conjunction with co-workers, to act appropriately, and to take responsibility for those actions.<sup>6</sup>

What Baxter Magolda describes as self-authorship is especially relevant in a society that has become increasingly partisan in substance and style—where narrowly defined and rigidly held perspectives are aggressively marketed as preferred stances. As Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt writes in his recent and provocative book, *On Bullshit*, "one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. . . . Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken it by it."<sup>7</sup> But, as Frankfurt asserts, the skillfulness with which bullshit is being propagated makes it increasingly difficult to recognize and, then, to counter when uncovered. That is because "the bullshitter" does not necessarily speak mistruths; his is a way of portraying reality so that it *appears* to be truthful. The end-game is to influence others to affirm as valid what is being portrayed or, at the very least, for the propagator "to get away with what he says." (p. 56).

Self-authorship is an antidote to all of this, and we cannot possibly imagine self-authorship without considering moral purpose and mindfulness: moral purpose provides an ennobling destination and mindfulness keeps us on course and on task. This is exactly what is required to lead a life that is worth living. If Bailey and other similar programs fail to help students and faculty succeed in that regard, then they will have failed higher education and society in fundamental ways. If Bailey and programs like it succeed, then the outcomes may have a ripple effect, contributing to a quiet revolution with profound impact. Most importantly, our students will be agents of change and our faculty will have enabled "higher" education.

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<sup>6</sup> Baxter Magolda, M. 2001. *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Frankfurt, H. 2005. *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 1.