

GPSOLO

ABA SOLO, SMALL FIRM AND GENERAL PRACTICE DIVISION

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Mindfulness and Lawyer Well-Being



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THE JOURNEY TO MINDFULNESS

By Melanie Bragg

This issue of *GPSolo* magazine is one I have been looking forward to all year long. It is filled with excellent articles that will give you an overview of the depth and breadth of the whole field of the practice of mindfulness. As I often stress in my bimonthly “Mindfulness 101” column published in our *GPSolo eReport*, there are many paths to the practice of being more “mindful”—becoming aware of your inner mental and physical signals and then cultivating the stillness within that arises from being in the here and *now* more often.

The bottom line is that the past and the future are illusions, and the only reality we have is the *present moment*. When you begin to ask yourself, *what is going on right now?*, things inside you begin to smooth out because all the images and feelings you project into the future or past are not actually happening *now*. Knowing this and practicing it every day will give you more energy and more productivity to carry out your many tasks for each day. I call it “energy management.”

The cultivation of this process of mindfulness will help you become a better lawyer because you are more empathetic and more able to deal with your clients’ problems in a proactive way in your new, calm state. This is the big kicker—over time you will see the results in your bank account and then you will know that your efforts were not in vain. It happens by just starting out with a few short practices that enable you to develop a worthwhile set of skills that not only help you and your family, but will give you an edge as an attorney to really help your clients in a more effective way. Gratitude, rituals, exercise,

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movement, meditation—all are forms of mindfulness that enhance your life.

In this issue we have a great combination of articles. Our introductory article, “Mindfulness, Mental Health, and Wellness,” is written by Scott L. Rogers, our newest bimonthly “Mindfulness 101” columnist in the *GPSolo eReport*. And a former “Mindfulness 101” columnist, Debi Galler, wrote the issue’s article on “Mindfulness as a Tool for Lawyers.” Scott and Debi served as special consultants for this issue, along with former *GPSolo* Editorial Board member Angela Morrison. I want to extend my thanks to the three of them for all they did in shaping the issue’s slate of articles and helping us find expert authors to write them. Scott also coauthored our article on “The Science of Mindfulness and the Practice of Law” with Amishi P. Jha, who has one of the best TED talks on this subject (available at tinyurl.com/y2dcqev7). Other articles in this issue explore important topics such as self-compassion, depression, relationship building, and compassion fatigue. There is even an article on mindfulness tech and an overview

examining how lawyers incorporate daily practices as diverse as conscious breathing, walking in nature, practicing yoga, having pets in the office, and flamenco dancing to find relief from the stress of our profession. Surely there is something that you can find to sink your teeth into to help you develop your practice further.

In this, my next to last “Chair’s Corner” column, I want to share the path I have taken over the years to be where I am today with mindfulness. My spiritual journey began in June 1991 when I was 34 years old. I had just finished my year as the first woman president of the Houston Young Lawyers Association. On the last night we had our annual summer party in conjunction with the State Bar of Texas annual convention in Houston. We had a big delegation of Russians at this meeting, and our party was called “Moscow on the Bayou.” We had ice sculptures in the shape of vodka bottles, lots of vodka, and strong Russian cigarettes. Needless to say, the next morning when I took off to a week-long trip to the Ashram, a famous retreat center in Calabasas, California (Barbra Streisand called it “boot camp with no food”), I was hungover and had no idea what I was getting into. The detox was intense, all these old people were kicking my butt on the hikes, and I quickly realized what a complete mess I was. I brought a copy of the *Living Bible* with me because, as a Methodist, I had never really studied it and I planned to read the Bible from cover to cover in chronological order. I was on a journey to explore why I felt the way I did, to look into where my ideas came from, and why I thought the things I thought. I made it through that week, came home, bought a juicer, changed my diet, and booked a trip to go back four months out so I could do it again more successfully. (I went back several times through the years and really learned a lot by hiking in the Santa Monica mountains.) In hindsight I laugh

because I was just about the most un-mindful and unaware young woman you could imagine, even though at the time I thought I had it all together. Life was about to teach me some valuable lessons.

Over the years since then I have pursued a deep dive into researching and learning about the spiritual traditions of the world, from the Catholic faith, to the Evangelical movement, to the study of myths with Joseph Campbell, my work with Jack Canfield, and many other mystical traditions. I have been a member of Benny Hinn's choir, have been an usher at Joyce Meyer's events, and even was one of the original participants in her conferences back when there were only a handful of people there. From 1998 until now I have gone to Nada Hermitage (or Spiritual Life Institute) in Crestone, Colorado, and enjoyed week-long spiritual retreats with a group of Carmelites, where I studied St. Teresa of Ávila, the grand wild woman of Catholicism, and St. John of the Cross, who wrote the famous canticle about the "Dark Night of the Soul." I also enjoy the beautiful Sangre de Cristo Mountains that turn blood red at sunset and the hot springs at Joyful Journey in Moffat, Colorado, where I will be in two weeks with my nieces, Erica and Elise Nystrom. I can't wait!

In the process of all this study and experimentation, much of which is based in my case on the Christian tradition, I began to gather tools and skills that helped me, and yet there was still something missing and I wasn't sure what it was. I had never taken the time to meditate like I do now, and it wasn't until about five years ago, at my retreat in Colorado, that I asked the sisters if they had a copy of *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle. A good friend, Karen Mize, had highly recommended *The Power of Now*, and I was ready. As so often the universe aligns, the sisters said, "No, we don't have the book, but we do have this set of CDs of

the book. Here, you take it, it's yours." Wow! Right off the bat I had my mission for the week. That is what typically happened there—something would jump out at me and I would pursue the study of that thing for the week I spent in the beautiful mountains in Colorado.

I sat in my hermitage and listened to the book and took notes, and something new emerged when I heard Tolle talk about the "pain body" inside all of us and how the concept of time is distorted in our culture to the point that we become miserable thinking about things that have already happened or might happen in the future. I realized then that my scanty meditation practice or prayer practice, whatever label you want to give it, was really not where it needed to be, and I set about on a course to learn to meditate for real this time and to really give these concepts a try. I got all of Eckhart Tolle's teachings on Audible and incorporated the practices.

It was about this time in 2014 that the second edition of the GPSolo book *How to Capture and Keep Clients, Second Edition*, was being prepared, and I wanted to do a new chapter called "The Conscious Lawyer: How the Practice of Mindfulness Will Increase Your Bottom Line." At the time I had little empirical evidence of this, but I just knew it was true. I read every book about mindfulness I could get my hands on to write the chapter, and since then I have seen amazing things happen in my life and in my law practice. Honestly, in all my study and searching I never knew that deep, abiding daily inner happiness could be so easily attained with a few simple practices daily.

Once I began to write my bimonthly "Mindfulness 101" column for the *GPSolo eReport* two years ago, I took it up a few notches. After all, if I was going to write about it, I had to be the most dedicated practitioner I could possibly be.

Authenticity is key. I have written about my journey and progress along the way in my columns. It is a developing story. As I feel these wonderful feelings of satisfaction during the day, I say to myself, "I'm happy for no apparent reason."

When you get to where you notice and appreciate the little things in life, where you train your mind to stay in the now, rather than dwelling or ruminating, which is the worst and most harmful kind of stress to your physical body, you can get so much more done each day. This is not to say that I have got my mind completely trained or that I don't get off track at times, but the more aware you are of how your body and mind react to stress, the more you can implement strategies to take you out of it faster.

The bottom line is that, as lawyers, we have immense stress. Our fiduciary duties to our clients are a high bar to attain, and we must make sure each day that we are not reacting to things while we listen to and try to solve their problems, often with them not wanting to pay us. We have to manage our firms, keep up with the payroll, figure out how to market, and basically keep a bunch of balls in the air all the time. Some of us act out our frustrations in a variety of harmful ways that deplete our energy and shorten our lives.

Many say they don't have time to practice mindfulness, but I say: *You don't have time to not practice it!* I hope this issue of the magazine is one you read cover to cover. I am here to support you and to help you in any way I can by sharing my journey and telling you that I have seen many amazing treasures from doing what the experts in this issue recommend. I am excited about incorporating some new ones into my practice, too. We all have the same amount of time. Let's enjoy our lives as much as possible for all we have is *now*. I would love to hear from you at melanie@bragglawpc.com. Namaste. ■