

From Peace Without to Peace Within: My Path to Mindfulness
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I was invited to share my story with you today, to speak to your current theme, “Stories of Peace in a Troubled World.” And, so, I share my personal journey to peace with you...

When I consciously began my spiritual journey, I was twelve years old. My parents are atheist and agnostic, and we only attended church with relatives on special occasions. Up until then, although I had *heard* about God, I was never aware of really *feeling* God. I became passionate about this new sense of spirit I’d discovered, and I desperately tried to capture it by joining the church. After several months of classes which my dad graciously attended with me, I was baptized, given first communion and confirmed all on the same day at a local Catholic church.

But, I quickly became lost in Parish I’d joined. At that time, my church was still doing some masses in Latin, obviously a bit of a disconnect for a twelve-year-old. And there was very little sense of community. My enthusiasm slowly dwindled until I could no longer really call myself a Catholic.

So, I began searching to find that feeling again - something to make me feel connected to Spirit.

As I explored various religious teachings, studied books on Buddhism and read essays on atheism, I experienced life. Although I come from a wonderfully loving family and a privileged background, and I always had more than enough in terms of basic material needs, I encountered pain in myself and in those that I loved - depression, anxiety, cancer, and death all came my way, as they do for many of us. My sense of desperation for a connection to something healing, something bigger grew. I sought peace, but I didn’t know where to begin seeking. And so, instead of *being* with the pain, I set out into the world *doing*.

In college, I had a nickname. My friends called me “Save-the-world Grace.” At that time, I think I thought of it as a compliment, and I rooted my identity there. I had set my mind to fixing the brokenness in the world. I was in an audacious phase, and *I* was going to fix things.

I led a volunteer team at the local Salvation Army; I volunteered at a support group for low-income parents; I interned at a domestic abuse shelter; and I worked with a child advocacy organization. I just signed up, went out, and *did* everything I could to make things “better.” As I learned more and more about all of the suffering in the world, my own world got darker and darker. So I kept *doing* in an effort to create the light I and the world so desperately needed.

I even consciously *stopped* doing things that brought me joy because I thought of them as purely selfish. For example, I gave up dancing, something I’d done out of pure love since I was 5 years old, because I didn’t believe there was time in my life to indulge in it.

And my depression deepened.

In my very last semester, a few weeks before graduation, I could no longer get myself to go to class. I had to call my family friend who was a doctor to prescribe me some emergency anti-depressants, which she reluctantly did. I was able to graduate.

Still not learning my lesson, I continued to focus all my energy on *doing*, seeking peace outside myself.

I spent several months at an orphanage in the Dominican Republic, a year serving with Americorps in Chicago. And then I got married and started grad school the same week. And in a year and a half, I had my Masters in Social Work, feeling well on my way to creating peace in the world, still experiencing intense bouts of depression.

I began working with the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice (ICPJ). By that time, I was calling myself an atheist, but my work with ICPJ gave me just what I needed at the time – exposure to people of diverse faiths, connection with spirit.

Still, since those early teen years when I had first “lost God,” I continued to feel unsettled, like something was missing. There was no lightness to my life. So many things needed doing, how could I waste a moment? I brought an energy of intensity, seriousness, and gravity to all I did. And I suffered for it, my relationships suffered for it, and my “peacemaking” work in the world suffered for it. As Thomas Merton said, “The frenzy of the activist...destroys her own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of her own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.” That was me.

Then, thankfully, things changed.

I suffered my greatest personal loss and trauma when I was 25. I became very ill about half-way through my first pregnancy, and after several days in the hospital, we lost the baby. I know many people experience this kind of loss. I had not known such intense personal pain ever in my life.

But, as many spiritual traditions teach, out of death is rebirth. It was out of this darkest time that I found the light.

After several months of deep depression, therapy, and beginning a new mindfulness meditation practice, I had an awakening. It happened in a moment - a lifting of the cloud, an opening of the heart. And I felt reconnected with Source, the divine, All That Is. Thus began my path toward *inner* healing, learning, and growing; my journey for *inner* peace.

When I look back, I realize that I had become so far removed from myself, so out of touch with my own soul, my own pain, my own sickness, that I’d lost sight of my own need to be healed. While I was “out there” working for peace, I’d forgotten to work for my own.

Through my meditation practice and some wonderful, wise teachers, I began to get to know my true self, and more importantly, I began to understand what was *not* my true self - my subconscious assumptions, habitual stories, and negative patterns of thought that were dominating my consciousness. By looking within, truly with intention, focus, and energy, for the first time in my life, I began to find *my* peace.

But the part I find most interesting is not the effect my peace had on me, but the effect of my peace on the outside world.

It was as if the more I worked to gain clarity within, the less resistance I met in the world. The world around me was the same old world; but my perceptions had changed. And so, I could exist in that same physical world with joy, lightness, and peace.

Since that awakening, about 6 years ago now, I have felt more “in sync” with the Universe than I ever thought possible: I find the teachers I need when I need them; the lessons to learn appear when I need to learn them; the answers I seek are often waiting for me, if I am mindful of them. My relationships are far better - more rooted in love, compassion, acceptance, and learning. My work is better - inspired by a greater purpose, governed by a gentle divine energy. I now literally accept everything as my teacher, and so all experiences, good, bad, and ugly are meaningful and I can (try to) embrace them.

I have found the freedom and strength to follow my heart – and the right path has opened up for me. I am now exactly where I feel I am meant to be. I’m currently staying home with my two young daughters, growing deeply and learning with them. And since mindfulness meditation changed my life, I have felt called to share it with others. So I am currently training to be a mindfulness educator for youth, sharing mindfulness tools to help them find a place of inner peace as they navigate this world. I feel especially called to work with kids living in low-income environments, dealing with so many additional stresses in their young lives. And I’ve begun teaching mindfulness to children at a local afterschool program, which has been an amazing experience of love and growth.

Even with this newfound peace and purpose, I’m reminded of how human I am all the time through my mistakes, my defensiveness, my impatience, especially in my role as a parent! But having discovered access to my place of peace, I can always return there. And I can always be renewed.

On my journey, from seeking peace outside of myself to seeking peace within, I find that I’ve come full-circle. Because, of course, the path for inner peace naturally generates peace beyond the self. Every connection I have with another being based in love, compassion, and respect is *itself* an act of peacemaking. And, beyond this implicit peacemaking, I feel now, more than ever, called to act for justice, and I continue to take action when and where I can to challenge systems of oppression in the world. Awakening to self-love has awakened an even deeper love for all beings within me.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a beloved teacher of mine and of many, says, “If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we cannot share peace and happiness with others, even those we love, those who live under the same roof. If we are happy, if we are peaceful, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone

in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.”

I know many of us walk this path, cultivating inner peace as best we can. And I believe so strongly that in order for our world to be healed, we must find the peace within our own souls.

I feel now like I really am a “peacemaker,” because peace exists in what we each are to one another; and peace begins within.