

Transformation, One Observation at a Time:
Mindfulness and Social Justice

(excerpted from a teaching by Amanda Silver, IJS alumna and board member)

When I think about mindfulness and social justice, the first thing that comes up is the quote by Gandhi:

Be the change you want to see in the world.

Implicit in Gandhi's words is that for real change to happen, we must embody it. It's not only *what* I am doing (ie campaign organizing, advocacy, etc.) but *how* I am doing it that matters.

I realized this many years ago, when I was working as the Director of Social Justice at B'nai Jeshurun in NYC, a large synagogue with a powerful social justice mandate. From an external perspective, I was doing incredible work. We had launched a community organizing initiative, six new organizing campaigns, and just held an accountability session for the Speaker of the City Council to push him to support a health care bill for 14,000 low income workers in NYC. 600 people attended. It was a total success.

But inside, I was burnt out, cynical, tired, and confused. I had no balance in my life, I had no boundaries. My heart was broken. Within the year, I left the organization in the middle of an existential crisis. I did not think that I could do social justice work any longer.

The interesting thing was that I had a meditation practice—I meditated several times/week. I thought I was doing the right things to “be the change”, but it wasn't working.

I became very curious about the question of *how*: how do you become the change you want to see in the world? Between culture, our biology and triggers, our beliefs systems, habituated response patterns, are we fighting an uphill battle? And how do we help to foster groups, organizations, and movements to be the change? To not get mired in defensive tactics, in us/them dynamics, in perpetuating the same systems of oppression that we aim to rectify?

The foundation of addressing these questions, from my experience and research, is mindfulness.

Not just meditation, but *mindfulness*.

Sharon Salzberg, a Buddhist practitioner and teacher, writes that “mindfulness is the cultivation of a different quality of attention, one where we relate to what we see before us not just as an echo of the past, or a foreshadowing of the future, but more as it is right now.” Jon Kabat Zinn, states this in a slightly different way, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

As a social justice leader, I meditated. I had this “practice” that I was proud of...but was I actually mindful and did it translate into other areas of my life? It did not. In the years since, I dedicated myself to cultivating mindfulness, and to helping other social justice leaders on the front lines, through mindful leadership development, to address these questions. What follows are some reflection questions and observations on how mindfulness has supported my social justice work, on a personal, organizational, and field level.

How has mindfulness supported my social justice work? How has it impacted yours? Consider these questions for journaling, group discussion, or just quiet contemplation.

Personal:

- **What patterns and beliefs do you hold about your engagement in social justice work?** Some things that I noticed: Mindfulness helped me to notice thoughts of unworthiness, perfectionism, martyrdom, and an overwhelming sense of urgency.
- **How does your body connect to your social justice work?** Mindfulness of what is present in the moment and especially in my body, enables me to notice when I am out of balance BEFORE I get to a point of total exhaustion. I am able to notice the signs, and do something about it.

Organizational:

- **What grounds the work of your organization?** My mindfulness practice helps me to notice the small wins in the midst of larger seemingly intractable issues, to not become overwhelmed with the intensity of the work and to center myself from a position of inner strength and belief in success.
- **How can we adopt a position of non-judgmental curiosity?** Being willing to say *I don't know* makes a huge difference in our work. I have learned to challenge the dominant mode of doing, doing all the time. Instead, cultivating a willingness among groups and teams to say, “We don't have the answer to this.”

Let's sit here. Let's notice and be curious. Let's ask questions. Let's be strategic, rather than reactive."

- **How do we create safety in our own communities?** By being mindful of the diverse voices, backgrounds, and hearts in our own organizations, we create spaces in which it is safe to name our unconscious patterns. Things to notice, especially in organizational settings, are how we use our tone of voice, hold our privilege, our patterns of defensiveness, and our assumptions of universal experience or belief.

On a field level

- **How do we create spaces for people to be mindful together?** It takes work to act from a place of compassion, rather than hate or defensiveness. We must notice what it means to act out old group patterns. Things to consider, especially in social justice spaces, include:
 - **Intentional listening:** I once participated in a social change conference at which aggression, anger and frustration at the lack of inclusivity representing all the constituents in the agenda became overwhelming. Participants were hurt and triggered, could not work together well, and rightly so, refused to follow the agenda. Beginning the planning process for the conference with mindful listening to constituents, as well as a spirit of openness and inclusion could have made a tremendous difference in creating an inclusive program.
 - **Taking time to pause and make space:** At this conference, one skillful facilitator named the tension and made the decision to pause the agenda and take a break. When we returned, all 120 participants sat as the facilitator guided us through a loving-kindness practice and called us back to the highest purpose of our gathering. The conference then proceeded without the defensiveness or high level anxiety and frustration that was present at first. It was truly remarkable, and a lesson in what courageous, mindful leadership can do in the face of high emotions.

Social justice is about transformation – about transforming ourselves, our communities, and society to support the well-being, safety, and health for all. The spectrum, from individual, to organizational, to field are all intertwined. Gandhi got it so right: Sustainable long term change will only occur when we are able to do things that allow us to embody new ways of being with one another; ways of being that cultivate compassion, healing, and interconnectedness.

Sit with your reflections:

- How has mindfulness helped support your work for social justice or change?
- How do you take your mindfulness practice into the external world for change?