EMBRACING MINDFULNESS: A WOMAN
SUPERINTENDENT’S JOURNEY

By
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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of TEENA PAIGE MCDONALD find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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EMBRACING MINDFULNESS: A WOMAN
SUPERINTENDENT’S JOURNEY

Abstract

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Critiques of literature call for increased mindfulness research and practical applications in education arenas. This study focuses on the reflective practice of a woman superintendent developing coping skills to reduce stress. More specifically, the author shares how, by using mindfulness in daily practice, she is able to have a clearer understanding and deepened relationship with life and work experiences while at the same time learning to cope with stress. This auto ethnography, through a feminist view, looks at the stress of being a female superintendent and explores ways of coping with the unavoidable stresses by using mindfulness practices, while at the same time using mindfulness to overcome gender role conflict faced by female leaders and to build a highly reliable organization. Further studies are warranted in ways to help other educators learn and use mindfulness practices to reduce stress, increase learning, and develop highly reliable organizations.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTERS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. KLIPSAN BEACH COTTAGES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM AND THE PURPOSE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting With a Stranger</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Introductions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems of Stress in the Superintendency Surface</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History Preceding the Confluence of Thought</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Introduction to Mindfulness</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Where I Am Now</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pathway to My Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Study As an Autoethnographic Story</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. AT THE BEACH: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autoethnography As Method</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envisioning the Product</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Ethnography Is Difficult</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why We Are Doing the Work</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journaling to Storytelling</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discerning Themes and Coding While Collecting Data at the Same Time</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitfalls We May Face</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Worries and Reflections</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness Becoming a Part of Life</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. DOING THE WORK OF THE SUPERINTENDENT</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering the First Few Months of the New Job</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate + Work + Family = Stress</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to Know the Board</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Stage for a Good Start</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Storm Brewing</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levy Preparations</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Chapter | Title                                                                
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>GUEMES ISLAND: A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO ANALYSIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rocky Weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness in Daily Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Anticipated Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How We Each View Mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Struggles With Mindfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You Are Already There</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My Epiphany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Sudden Realization Sinks In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Light Bulb Goes On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering My Question: How Do I Correlate My Expectations With Reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effects of Mindfulness on Me As a Woman Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness and Gender–My Struggles to Make Sense of Gender in the Superintendency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Are We As Leaders Remaining Mindful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits to Me As a Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying Goodbye to a Stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>BEING A SUPERINTENDENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting With Jane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School Board Ah-ha's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Levy Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA: APPROACHING INTERPRETATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Circling Back on Prior Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evolution of Thought and Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness Can Be Easy, the Journey Difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflections on Mindfulness and Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Continuing Challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SUMMARY**

**REFERENCES**

**APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL SUPERINTENDENTS**
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL BOARD MEMBERS ........................................ 173
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM ............................ 175
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father and my late mother, who both provided me with the love of learning and the passion to make a difference.
CHAPTER ONE

KLIPSAN BEACH COTTAGES: AN INTRODUCTION TO

THE PROBLEM AND THE PURPOSE

Meeting With a Stranger

I was supposed to be in Long Beach yesterday to meet with a fellow doctoral candidate to continue working on our dissertations. Instead, I was on the freeway headed north from Vancouver, Washington in a torrential rain storm. I was temporarily blinded by a wall of water splashing up from a semi’s tires. I had a moment of rippling blindness. As soon as my vision cleared from the momentary scare, my thoughts slipped back to the presentation I and two of my fellow superintendents had just finished giving to the participants in the superintendent internship program at the WSU satellite campus in Vancouver. Our topic was “Looking Back, Looking Forward: Lessons Learned as School Superintendents.” Joining me was Joel Greene, a superintendent whom I had first met when we were in the same superintendent internship program together 8 years before. I had talked to Joel at least once a month, if not more, during each school year since we had both become superintendents. Either he would call me or I would call him; whoever had called would either ask a technical question or just ask, “How are you doing?” The other participant was Jane Nash, a neighboring district superintendent with whom I had been working closely for several years. Jane and I often met at conferences and had a glass of wine together while our husbands talked about fly fishing or hiking. Joel and Jane were my friends as well as mentors. When the professor in charge of the Cohort program invited me to speak and asked whether I knew of anyone else for the panel, Joel’s and Jane’s were the first names I gave him. Joel and Jane both wanted me to stick around after the presentation to go out
to lunch. It sounded fun, but I told them I had other plans and described the dissertation work weekend planned.

After I had finished giving the speech, I was tempted to just drive home. The presentation had been well-received, and I was tired. I imagined how I could be at home already, sitting in front of my fireplace, cuddled up with my husband, sharing with him the good feelings I had about my presentation. Instead, I continued to drive north to Long Beach.

As I drove, I thought back on our presentation. I was surprised to see that not much had changed in the 8 years since I had been there. When I was in the superintendent internship program, there were four other women in my cohort group. I had counted only five women out of the 60 interns in the room today at my presentation. Both Joel and Jane had commented on the small number of female interns in this round of the program.

I focused back on the drive and the treacherous conditions and again thought to myself: Why am I going to a cottage I have never seen before to meet with someone I have only talked to on the phone? I reminded myself that I had initiated this “doctoral writing weekend” and that Laurie, a fellow candidate, had been waiting at the cottage since yesterday. She sounded understanding on the phone when I shared that I would be meeting her a day later than planned, but I heard frustration in her voice when she learned that I wouldn’t be there until later Saturday and then have to leave Sunday morning.

I was nervously looking forward to talking to Laurie about how each of our studies were progressing. I told myself this meeting would be worthwhile because she was studying mindfulness and writing her manuscript in the form of auto ethnography. Possibly we could help each other through the grueling process of research, collecting data, coding, and writing.
Three hours later I pulled up to a driveway with a foliage-covered sign: “Klipsan Beach Cottages.” By then the rain had stopped and there was a fine mist rising up around the area. Laurie had texted me earlier to say she was already in Cabin 4 and to come on in when I got there. I followed the SLOW, 5 mph signs through an immaculately landscaped garden area, turned up a small hill, and saw a row of small cottages nestled on a gentle ridge. There were eight separate, secluded, and charming cottages with fireplaces. As I pulled up by Cabin 4, I saw between the cabins an unobstructed ocean view. I let out a sigh as I rubbed my knotted shoulders, and I thought at least the cabins and the surroundings were beautiful.

I felt as if I were on a blind date. Really the only conversations I had had with Laurie had been on the telephone as we prepared for our preliminary exams several months prior. I was nervous because I felt as if I would be opening myself up to be vulnerable about my work with someone I’d never met before. I carried my backpack full of books and articles, my computer, and my overnight bag up the pathway and across the small deck of the cabin. Tentatively, I knocked on the door.

Laurie almost immediately opened the door and welcomed me with a hug. “So glad you finally made it here!” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “I have been getting a lot of reading done, but I’m glad you are here.”

I set down my luggage, and turned to the large picture windows that overlooked the beach. Laurie said, “Yeah, that’s the first thing I did when I got here yesterday. I looked over that grassy knoll and noticed the wide-open sky. And look, it’s sunny for God's sake!” I chuckled and thought about the drive I’d had getting to the destination, through the rain, the mudslides over the windy roads by Astoria and even through a bit of snow over the Coast Range. I chuckled to myself and thought, *Yes, it is sunny for God's sake.*
When Laurie smiled, the dimples in her cheeks showed prominently. She was petite and her short blond hair was styled in an attractive bob. She had a slight Midwestern drawl, even though she’d told me in a previous conversation she had lived in Washington for a number of years. Laurie continued, “I was reading last night and fell asleep on the davenport and decided that is my spot. You get the bedroom.” She added, “I know we said we would get the two-bedroom, but when I arrived yesterday the innkeeper really convinced me this would be big enough for both of us.” She laughed and said, “He is a lovely manager. He really thought I was crazy when I answered his question about why we were coming here–when I told him we were working on our dissertations and writing all weekend, he said, ‘You are coming here to do what?’”

We both laughed. I looked around the cottage. Laurie had a big overstuffed easy chair staked out as her territory. There were books and papers in neat piles around the front of the chair, and a small fuzzy throw blanket was swept to one side.

I took a few minutes to put my suitcase in the bedroom and told Laurie I was going to change clothes. I was wearing my black suit from that morning’s presentation. I quickly slipped into a pair of jeans and a sweater. It felt so good to take off my high-heeled boots; I had been wearing them since 5:00 that morning.

Laurie called in to me, “How did your presentation go?”

“It went well,” I called back. I walked into the living room and sat opposite of Laurie. “I was really lucky to have my friends Joel and Jane be there as co-presenters. They are good friends of mine and we all bounced our presentations off each other as we were preparing. It is nice to have fellow superintendents you can talk to and share with.”
“You are lucky to have such great confidants,” Laurie replied. I nodded and smiled as I moved into the kitchen.

The Introductions

In short order I moved in with my computer set up on the kitchen table, the surface covered with books by authors of books on how to write autoethnographic text—Chang, Emerson, Ellis, Saldana, Glesne, and Muncey—as well as stacks of new articles yet to be read. I had prepared for this weekend far in advance, taking with me resources I knew I needed to proceed with my writing. I told Laurie, “These are a few of the books that I’m using to help me prepare to code my data and write my autoethnography. There are four things I want to get done this weekend. First, I want to reread some of my research books that focus on writing ethnographies. Then I want to read some new research articles that Dr. Gates sent to me and that I picked up at the Vancouver Library, and finally I want to set up a timeline to finish my data collection, coding, and writing.”

Laurie raised her eyebrows and said, “That is a lot to get done in the few hours you are here. Remember you told me you would be willing to be interviewed as a participant in my research study as well.”

I told her, “You may be right. I always put lots of goals in front of me... the stress encountered by trying to reach them all is part of the reason I’m doing this study.” Before her remarks, I had believed I would be able to get everything I planned accomplished, but after she said that I began to have doubts.

“Tell me about your study,” Laurie prompted.

This was the million-dollar question. Every time I told someone I was writing my dissertation, their first question was much like Laurie’s. “Well,” I told her, “It’s an
autoethnographic study about using mindfulness to reduce stress in my job as a superintendent. I consider my study a ‘border-crossing’ (Chang, 2008) experience. I will be chronicling my experiences using a feminist view as a woman school superintendent as I move to a new district.” She raised her eyebrows. Most people, when I gave them this explanation, would say, “Oh, that sounds interesting,” and let it go at that. I could tell Laurie was actually interested because she responded, “Tell me more.”

I explained to her how Chang (2008) described border crossing experiences as ones that take place

when you become friends with others of difference or of opposition or when you place yourself in unfamiliar places or situations. Such experiences with the unfamiliar cultural characteristics of others often challenge and cause you to adjust your cultural “standards” of thinking, perceiving, evaluating and behaving. Extraordinary events such as new jobs/schools and other life crises also disrupt daily routines and challenge familiar values, which can lead to a new level of understanding of self and others. (pp. 73-74)

“This is interesting research,” Laurie said. “How has it changed as you’ve moved forward?” Before I answered, I thought back on how often I reflected on Langer’s (2005, p. 43) words:

It’s not easy to try something without knowing the outcome, but mindfulness can teach us that not knowing the outcome is actually preferable and that, regardless, the evaluations of others—both good and bad—are not really objective and needn’t shape our choices.

I could go back to 7 years ago and tell Laurie how completely my study had changed; but instead I chose to think and share with her about how it had changed since I’d started the journaling and self-study process.
Problems of Stress in the Superintendency Surface

Answering Laurie’s question about the changes in my study, I continued, “My pages upon pages of journaling and initial coding morphed my study from organizational socialization to the transcending theme of stress in the superintendency. As I have continued gathering data and reading literature about stress, mindfulness surfaced as an important concept. I am finding that studies indicate mindfulness and meditation can reduce stress. The more I read and learn about mindfulness, the more I want to see if it will help me, and therefore allow me to help others, reduce stress in the world of the superintendency.”

I continued, “I am looking at the experience, in depth and in the moment, what is going on in my professional work life and self-reflect on how I am handling it. I seek a clearer picture of what the superintendency means to me. I think our studies may be similar, and I am learning and experiencing mindfulness through meditation as a part of my daily routine to help me and others cope with the stress of the job. I still have big questions: How do I juxtapose my expectations with reality? In what ways does mindfulness practice affect me in my role as a female superintendent?”

“That sounds like the orientation I’m taking with my study as well, only mine is not related to stress,” Laurie replied. I asked her to explain more, and she told me about dealing with her work as an inner calling. We talked a few more minutes about her work, and then she asked me to talk more about the stress in the superintendency.

I told her, “Some of my concerns about the stress of the job keep me up at night. I hope that this study will help transform how I look at my work and my life. I moved to a new district and I had to run a levy, make 1.5 million dollars in cuts, close a building, deal with some difficult personnel issues, and bargain with unions with four open contracts. Furthermore, I had to
terminate the employment of one of my close co-workers because of some large errors, and it made me sad when I had to tell her she couldn’t work for the district any longer. After I told her, I shut my doors, put my head on my desk, and sobbed. This is not an easy job.”

I continued describing how stress affected me: “As a woman superintendent, I look at what researchers are finding and I am alarmed. These aren’t just numbers and facts to me. It’s personal. I didn’t realize, until I first took on the role as a female superintendent, the full impact of the job upon my life and my health. My blood pressure rose steadily—before I took this type of job I wasn’t taking blood pressure medication, and before I started mindfulness work I was taking two different prescriptions and my blood pressure was still sometimes high.”

Laurie said, “That’s why, after doing the superintendent internship program, I chose not to even get into that arena. It seems much too stressful to me.”

“It is stressful. Would you like to hear what researchers are saying about educators and stress?” I wanted to share the information with her, partly to justify the stressful nature of the work and partly as a warning.

“Sure, have at it,” Laurie replied.

“The stress of working as an educator has become the subject of concern and research,” I said. “I read an article by Matthews and Casteel (1987) where they looked at 244 employees of six different professions and found that education professionals had greater stress levels than did individuals working in the other professions.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Laurie professed. “I just read in a recent Education Week article where Jerome Murphy (2011), the former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said that among his sample of school leaders attending a professional program on
self-knowledge, 89% reported feeling overwhelmed and 84% neglected to take care of themselves in the midst of stress. She paused, and then asked, “What else did you find?”

I continued, “Anderson, Levinson, Barker, and Kiewsa (1999) reported the need for additional research on coping with stress to maintain ‘bright, creative professionals within the school system’ (p. 13). The article focused mainly on teacher stress and discussed many negative effects of stress and burnout, but I know the same factors affect all education professionals, just as you shared with Murphy’s research.” I mulled over the statistics she had just cited; they made me feel as if I wasn’t alone in this difficult profession.

Laurie reminded me, “I know you’ve heard me say I’m not interested in being a superintendent in part because of the stressful situations I’ve seen with superintendents I’ve worked with.”

“Well, findings around stress, from what I am reading, are particularly pronounced when looking at the job of school superintendent,” I replied. “In the 2007 American Association of School Administrators superintendent survey, 59% of the respondents reported their stress levels as being ‘considerable’ or ‘very great.’ The non-profit research group Public Agenda surveyed school leaders in 2000 and found much the same. Seventy-nine percent of the superintendents agreed ‘very much’ or ‘somewhat’ that the superintendency is a high stress, high visibility job that requires individuals to withstand a lot of heat in dealing with daily pressures (Reeves, 2010).

“And that’s not all. Gardiner and Tiggeman (1999) found that the stress of women was higher than that of men in a predominantly or traditionally male work environment. And Banuelos (2008) found that women superintendents internalized their superintendent experiences and reported negative impacts of lack of sleep and bad eating habits, with stress and depression being outward indicators of those impacts.”
“It sounds like being a superintendent should have a ‘Hazardous to Your Health’ tag attached,” Laurie joked. She continued with the question, “You know that not all stress is bad for you though, right?”

“That is true,” I replied. “Several studies indicate that not all stress is unhealthy or bad (Brock & Grady, 2002; Buhler, 1993; Lyles, 2005; Queen & Queen, 2004). Our bodies act the same way during negative stress (distress) as they do during positive stress (eustress). I noticed that during the years when I was an emergency medical technician. During any particularly difficult life-and-death rescue, my body would show the subconscious signs of stress, even if I didn’t feel particularly stressed. Eustress helped me to be on my toes, ready to react quickly.”

Laurie commented, “How you cope with stress, whether it be good or bad stress, is the key. If you have good coping skills, the stress shouldn’t be as dangerous.”

“I agree with you, Laurie,” I affirmed. “The key is coping with the stress. Studies about the devastating effect of constant stress have proliferated. Hawk and Martin (2011, p. 365) shared consequences and health problems. They quoted Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000): ‘The popular perception of the superintendency is that of an impossible job in which even the best and brightest confront escalating and competing demands.” Hawk and Martin went on to state that if administrators continue to have difficulties coping with the stresses of their positions, the end result will possibly be a shortage of educational leaders. They described an even worse scenario if they remain in their positions of the amplified potential for fatigue, burnout, and depression affecting their physical, mental, and emotional health. Finally, they shared Colgan (2003) and Domenech’s (1996) research, which indicates that as stress levels rise, the symptoms of stress can surface in many different forms, including physical disorders, and psychological
effects of stress on the human body and mind, including burnout, emotional exhaustion, and the scary effect of de-personalization.”

“Tell me more about what that means,” Laurie requested.

“Well, this occurs when superintendents get inundated with people and their issues and they have ‘encounter stress.’ In order to cope, people then become numbers.” I didn’t tell her that was how I’d felt my first year as a superintendent. I thought of the many contacts I had during the day as numbers or a check-off on my to-do list. I also didn’t tell her how often I would get home after a long day at work and try to decompress after focusing on finishing that numbered to-do list I had set before me at the beginning of that day.

“I know it is easy for superintendents to get inundated with people—I see it all the time,” Laurie said. Laurie works in the central office of a large school district in Seattle. “Is there anything else you found out?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “Gmelch (1995) and Leher and Woolfolk (1993) further shared effects of stress, including headaches, ulcers, illnesses, or disability and hypertension, high blood cholesterol, and obesity.”

“Ouch,” Laurie remarked.

“And I am finding out that, as Gmelch (1995) noted, most data-based studies investigated the sources of stress, but far fewer studies have actually looked at how educators can and do cope with job pressures.” I could have further shared, but didn’t, how I had struggled over the last several years to figure out my own way of coping with the job pressures, and that I wasn’t doing a good job of finding the answers.

“That sounds like a gap in literature that you might help fill!” Laurie said hopefully.
“Well, I can tell you many of those symptoms fit me. When I was in my previous district, my focus on work was all encompassing and I disregarded time for myself and my family—there were times when my husband Gary had a nice dinner fixed and I was either too distracted or too busy to let him know I would be home late. I would let the job overpower my personal life and I gave up precious time with family, my marriage, and fun activities I used to pursue. When I left my previous district, I had almost all of my vacation days still left on the books because I had neglected to take them.”

“That is one thing I try to do,” Laurie commented. “Even when everything is hectic, I still plan vacation time for me.”

“I want to do that, especially when things are stressful. Last year I moved to a new, larger district in a different part of the state. It’s about 9 hours away from my previous district. This left us with two homes and a new rental, moving boxes stuck in unused bedrooms, and me working two jobs as I transitioned from one district to another.”

**The History Preceding the Confluence of Thought**

“Why are you concerned about the stress of the job now?” Laurie asked. “You’ve been doing the job for a number of years.”

“Well,” I answered, “It was my 54th birthday last fall, and I felt the constant impact of my mother’s warning. She died of colon cancer at age 54, possibly caused in part by the stress of having a family-owned construction business. I didn’t realize at the time how hard that work must have been for her. She was a woman in a male-dominated world. Most of my mother’s friends were confined to duties of rearing children and managing the household. She had to deal with that in addition to helping run the business, and in her day it was not generally accepted for women to be co-managing a construction business.”
“Now it’s making sense to me,” Laurie said.

“When I moved, I met new people and learned about my new school district. I am surrounded by administrators with health problems: My 53-year-old business manager has colon cancer, two of the principals have cancer, and one principal has heart problems. There are significant changes in my life and I want to do something about my feelings of stress. I want to cope better—so that I can be not only healthier, but also better able to lead my school district as it confronts many challenges,” I confessed. I didn’t share with Laurie my worries of my life turning out exactly like my mom’s—working non-stop until she died and not having taken the time to enjoy the journey along the way.

I did tell her that I wanted to learn to control the stressors that come naturally with my job and the feelings that come naturally with a job I love.

“Is mindfulness making a difference?” Laurie asked.

“Well, I am learning that it doesn’t fix everything, but it does help me cope,” I told her. “I have been using mindfulness as a stress reduction technique, and my administrative team has been completing mindfulness activities with me.”

As a superintendent, I do several things to support principals in their professional development, and I normally set up a series of book studies throughout the year, giving the principals choices on their study path. I specifically asked them ahead of time if I could have a few minutes at the beginning of each of our weekly book studies to share some mindfulness activities. I remember the first exercise I did with my team and how worried I was that they might think I was a quack for bringing such unorthodox approaches into the administrative meeting. Using mindfulness in a school setting is rare, and I knew from my previous discussions that none of the principals had had any experience with mindfulness activities. Perhaps I was
reflecting on my own feelings when I was first exposed to meditation. I remembered how strange it felt for me to encounter something that felt so foreign.

I explained to Laurie, “I am using mindfulness-based stress reduction exercises in my daily practice. If you would have been in my board room last week before a particularly stressful meeting, you would have seen me there, in my chair, spending 10 minutes breathing slowly, with my eyes closed, meditating. As I breathe I think to myself, breathe in Calm, breathe out Smiles. It seems to be working. As I read and practice other strategies, maybe we can talk about them next time.” I didn’t tell her the practice was hard for me to sustain and that I sometimes felt I was not getting anywhere by doing it. I didn’t share my worries about whether I would actually learn something through my study and whether it would make a difference in my life and my practice.

“I have been meditating for a long time and I don’t think there is one way to be mindful. Just thinking about being mindful means you are being more mindful,” she told me.

**An Introduction to Mindfulness**

“Do you want to hear my story about my first meditation experience?” I asked. I didn’t tell her about sitting in my professor’s class, when I was truly a skeptic about the whole experience. I wanted to share about when I first thought I could actually embrace mindfulness and meditation.

“Sure, bring it on,” Laurie replied.

“I walked into the dimly lit room,” I began the story. “In the corner of the room, a setting that could transcend you from the Methodist Church to a meditative Buddhist temple in the Far East was visible. A bamboo screen covered with a rich tapestry was the backdrop for a settee covered with plump cushions of various shades of reds, purples, and yellows. To the right of the
cushions was a table with a myriad of Mid-Eastern looking artifacts set as an altar. The brass lamp had a deep red glass shade, and the lighting fanned out over a picture of the Dalai Lama, with a bell-like object and mallet beside it, as well as a small lit candle and a brass statue of a woman figure with many arms. Behind these smaller ornaments was a simple vase filled with dark crooked limbs and a few dark, dried cattails. They made a stark contrast against the bare white wall behind them. To the left was a small piano bench with a cushion on it.”

“So you experienced an Eastern approach to meditation,” Laurie commented.

“Yes,” I replied. “The moderator for the evening introduced Lhundup Chodon, a Buddhist nun from Wisconsin. I had no idea what to expect. When all of us were standing, a small, wrinkled, older woman dressed in a yellow and red sari seemed to float into the room. She was carrying a beautiful little white dog. As the dog looked up at her, she carefully placed it on the cushion to the left of the settee and then turned to the altar. She bowed and silently stayed in that pose for more than a minute. She then turned to us, smiled genuinely, and proceeded to settle herself in a yoga position of sitting cross-legged on the settee.”

“Sounds fun. I wish I could have been there,” Laurie remarked.

“It was fun,” I replied. “The next 2 hours were a most interesting and relaxing experience. Chodon took us through a meditative experience and shared Buddhist teachings that help people develop and sustain their mindfulness. One of the things that impressed me was that she was a real person, sharing her own struggles with staying mindful.”

“That is what I think you will find on this journey—these are real people using meditation,” Laurie explained. “Gunaratana (2011) noted that Westerners often ‘expect the meditator to be an extraordinarily pious figure in whose mouth butter would never dare to melt. A little personal
contact with such people will quickly dispel this illusion. They usually prove to be people of enormous energy and gusto, who live their lives with amazing vigor.”

**Understanding Where I Am Now**

I laughed. “As I am learning in this process. When I think back on how I did on a self-check using the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Cordon & Finney, 2008) as I first began studying mindfulness, I know I’m making progress. Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, and Orsillo (2007) described how the MAAS assesses attention and awareness in daily life using a 5-point scale. As I ran through the series of statements a few months ago, I found myself saying *yes* to every statement.”

I found the article with the questions and began reading them to Laurie. “1. I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later. 2. I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else. 3. I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present. 4. I tend to walk quickly to get where I’m going without paying attention to what I experience along the way. 5. I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention. 6. I forget a person’s name almost as soon as I’ve been told it for the first time. 7. It seems I am “running on automatic,” without much awareness of what I’m doing. 8. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them. 9. I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I am doing right now to get there. 10. I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I’m doing. 11. I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time. 12. I drive places on ‘automatic pilot’ and then wonder why I went there. 13. I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past. 14. I find myself doing things without...
paying attention. 15. I snack without being aware I am eating… I did all of those things!” I finished.

Laurie joked, “It sounds like you were pretty mindless.” I laughed but thought to myself that she was not far from the truth.


Laurie said, “Don’t be too hard on yourself. Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 148) says it well: ‘From the outset of practice we are reminded that mindfulness is not about getting anywhere else or fixing anything. Rather, it is an invitation to allow oneself to be where one already is and to know the inner and outer landscape of the direct experience in each moment.’”

“I know that. It’s just that sometimes I feel as if I’m not getting anywhere,” I confessed. I knew from the reading I had done that mindfulness has many benefits. I kept thinking of Olson and Brown’s (2012) advice: “The development of a mindfulness practice is a central piece of courageous and sustainable leadership in education, and it is one that is greatly undervalued. Developing mindfulness is not easy, but it is possible” (para. 5). I was at the stage of thinking I can do this, I can do this, I can do this. I was convincing myself that this work was worthwhile.

“Where do you want to be?” Laurie asked me. “One thing you’ll learn is that the pursuit of goals is the antithesis of mindfulness.”

“Really, I just want to be able to be fully present in the moment without worrying too much about what comes next or what happened in the past,” I told Laurie. I was feeling uncomfortable with her questions. I interjected, “Okay, enough talk for a while, we have to read.”
We turned back to our individual studies, and a couple of hours later, I looked out the window and saw the sun setting over the ocean. I asked Laurie if she wanted to take a quick walk on the beach. She declined, saying she wanted to finish what she was reading. I told her I would be back shortly and headed out the front door on the small pathway to the beach. I breathed in deeply and smelled the pungent sea air that is present only when you are at the ocean. I was aware of the crunch of sand beneath my feet, I saw the seagulls dipping and swooning, and I watched the small sand crabs scurrying to a safe place as I walked toward them. It was private there, and the only sounds were the pounding of the surf and waves as they crested and fell in front of me and the occasional cry of the gulls. I did not see another person on the beach. I wondered whether, a year back, before I began my studies on mindfulness, I would have really taken the time to notice the details of my surroundings—whether I would have been able to relax so quickly and be so present in the moment. At times like that, I noticed subtle changes in my noticing of new things. I was becoming more aware of how things changed depending on the context and my perspective from which they were viewed. I reminded myself that I was making a difference in how I was making meaning through mindfulness. I had a fleeting thought of how fun it would be to have my easel and paints with me to capture the scene. I hadn’t painted anything in 15 years, mostly because I was so busy with work I hadn’t taken the time to do anything else.

The Pathway to My Study

I thought back on the journey; it had taken me 6 years to get me to that place. I smiled as I thought of how fellow student Greg and I snickered in the back of the room as our professor, Dr. Gordon Gates, led us through a series of exercises on mindfulness and meditation as part of our Qualitative Research class those many years ago. That was long before I took on the stressful
job as a female school superintendent. I reminisced about how I was so set to do a quantitative study on learning the job of being a female superintendent and how different that would have been from what I was doing now. I thought back on how my study changed to qualitative auto ethnography and how now the work was impacting how I saw not only my work, but also my life. I believed Goodall’s (2000) words: “Some of my trusted colleagues say ethnography is a calling. Maybe it is. I think you don’t choose to do it so much as it chooses you” (p. 9). It had chosen me.

I realized I was lucky that work got in the way those 6 years ago, when I’d put my dissertation work on hold, and I thought about how later the work was so much more meaningful to me. I knew the chair of my committee was disappointed when I hadn’t completed my dissertation then. I had just started a new job as superintendent of a small district in northeastern Washington. The job became all important, and I went on survival autopilot mode and attacked the work. I wanted to be successful by my own standards, as well as pleasing my school board, my community, and my superintendent internship professors. I really developed a schema of list-making to survive, and I was so busy completing things I would often finish up the day without even remembering my drive to work earlier that morning. In the time when I was at my previous district, I dealt with union strife and threatened strikes; the death of a beloved teacher; firing a bus driver who was a single mom raising two kids; an entire athletic team that broke athletic code by partying; and the near-death experience of my business manager, Joanne, in an auto collision that put her in the hospital for a month and killed her mother instantly. Joanne was unable to come back to work for more than 4 months right during budget preparation time as she recuperated. This was all along with confronting the regular day-to-day responsibilities of the job. I was paying the price for the high stress of the job by adding on more high blood pressure
medications and eating poorly. Reflecting back on those experiences and where I was with the study I had planned to undertake, I was so glad I’d had those years to reflect and refine my study to discover ways to use mindfulness as a way of reducing the stress of the job.

**The Study As an Autoethnographic Story**

I will write more in the coming chapters about my discussions with Laurie. She played a major role in how I’ve come to interpret my experience of mindfulness as appropriate to my leadership as a district superintendent and in the ways I’ve used, developed, and augmented the practice of mindfulness for coping with the stresses of my work and life. My fellow superintendents, Joel and Jane, and my dissertation chair, Gordon, also shaped my thinking by way of our conversations throughout the course of the study. Each of these four people helped unfold what you will read. In the chapters that follow, I have drawn on and shared from the wealth of stories we’ve discussed to convey what I have learned in telling this autoethnographic story.

In Chapter 2, I share another of my discussions with Laurie. In this chapter, I describe the conversation we had about our dissertations. We met together near the beginning of the study to help each other understand this design called autoethnography as well as to share our resources. Because Gordon was integral in both of our studies, his guidance and voice are also presented.

Having shared my experience of coming to terms with the background and problem of mindfulness as well as identifying and defending the decisions made regarding conducting an autoethnographic study, in Chapter 3 I offer a look at how both mindlessness and mindfulness affected my daily life as a superintendent. This perspective is expressed through excerpts from my journal entries and experiences that happened to me throughout the first part of the school
year. The first part of the chapter discusses my fears regarding my ability to simultaneously work full time, complete my dissertation during the first year at a new district, and keep my husband happy. The rest of the chapter unfolds largely through conversations with my two mentors and dear friends, Joel and Jane. Often I shared experiences that happened to debrief with my friends, or when I sought advice on how to proceed with an issue. I often share the struggles of learning mindfulness practice and talk about incidents that I looked back upon later, only to find that I had not demonstrated mindful behaviors.

Chapter 4 unfolds with another working weekend with Laurie. The timing of this chapter is later in the study, where I am making meaning of my personal mindfulness journey. Laurie and I compare our study of mindfulness and how we are both struggling to analyze what we have learned over the last year. This analysis relates the expression of the difficult work through examples; descriptions of handling difficult emotions such as fear and discouragement that became apparent through our discussion; and an account of how we built relationships with co-workers mindfully and how that impacted how we positioned ourselves in our work.

In Chapter 5, I again have conversations with Jane and Joel as I begin to exhibit signs of more mindful practices in being a superintendent. I introduce the characters Hannah and Steve, school board members. I provide comments that disclose how my understanding of how mindfulness played a part in helping me cope with the stressors. I describe how mindfulness practices helped me and my administrative team develop ways to a) identify, encourage, and embrace diverse voices to create richer representations within and about the organization; b) recognize contradictions and false assumptions that make alternative actions possible; c) bridge differences through compassion rather than use power and shame; d) clarify purposes oriented toward the present that rejuvenated meaning and dispelled hopelessness; and e) take
action to address concerns without becoming mired in worries about consequences or despair over failed expectations. You will meet my husband, Gary, and our son, Brett, as they give input on changes they saw.

Gary appears in Chapter 6 as well, as we spent a weekend in Victoria, B.C. celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary. This chapter is set 4 months after my last meeting with Laurie at the end of the study. In this chapter I look back upon and interpret the work and analysis engaged in earlier and describe how the culmination of the work with mindfulness transformed both my life and how I viewed my work.

Finally, the summary reads more like a chapter in a traditional dissertation, with specific literature being cited as a reason and a method whereby administrators and educators can more practically apply some of the techniques and realizations I gained over the course of the last year and a half.
CHAPTER TWO

AT THE BEACH: RESEARCH DESIGN

AND METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography As Method

My walk along the beach had me deep in thought about the goals I hoped to achieve, and I lost all sense of distance. When I looked back at the distant cottage, I was cold and concerned that Laurie might be worried about me. It was getting dark, and I trudged back up the grassy berm and waved to Laurie. It was comforting to see her waiting for me on the cottage porch. I picked up the pace and soon arrived back at the cabin.

As I got nearer Laurie smiled and said, “It looks as if you have been lost in thought.” I nodded as we turned back toward the cabin. Laurie continued, “I made a pot of tea. Do you want a cup to warm you up?” I gratefully wrapped my cold hands around the old cup and sipped the steamy, aromatic tea. Laurie settled into the easy chair with her own cup of tea. After showing me her latest book, she became absorbed in reading.

The book *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, written by Ellis in 2004, was on the top of my own pile. I picked it up and feathered through the well-annotated book. I finished the last two chapters, taking notes as I went.

Laurie looked up from her book and questioned, “Interesting info?”

“Yes,” I told her. “I think the first thing I want to determine is what I want my final product to look like from a bird’s-eye view, an overview. I know I want to write an evocative autoethnography—that much is clear to me. I understand and enjoy Ellis’s conversational storytelling. I’ve looked also at the 2011 journal article, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, and know I want to use the elements of storytelling shared in their article.
And what about your study, Laurie?” I was curious to see how the elements of her mindfulness work were similar to the work I was doing.

She explained, “I am also doing autoethnography, only I’m writing an emotive rather than an analytic piece. What makes an autoethnography emotive is a personal journey rather than a subjective one.”

I wasn’t quite sure what she was trying to tell me. I already knew the journey was emotional, and I was struggling with how I was planning to analyze what I learned. I should have asked her more questions about what she meant, but instead I read to her a quote from Ellis (2004):

Working from an orientation that blends the practices and emphases of social science with the aesthetic sensibility and expressive forms of art, researchers seek to tell stories that show bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experiences. The goal is to practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience. (p. 31)

I continued without giving Laurie a chance to comment, “It is my intent to use Goodall’s (2000) advice to write two intertwined stories that shape and inform each other—one personal and one professional. I want to write about how I took the turn as an ethnographer towards mindfulness, and how I am learning to locate my fieldwork and theoretical issues within the existing professional literature. It is important to me that this study affect my journey both professionally and personally. Goodall wrote:

The characters in your story have to learn something out of what happens to them. They must grow into an understanding and maybe change, forever, because of it. They must get deeply in touch with something vital within themselves. (p. 41)
Envisioning the Product

Laurie asked, “How are you forging ahead with your first chapter while you’re still in the midst of your fieldwork?”

I wanted to share with her Wolcott’s (1990) suggestion to anyone who expresses concern about writing before the research is completed: “Write a preliminary draft of the study. Then begin the research” (p. 22). Instead I explained, “Reading this book and this last journal article helps me think about the writing I will be doing. I have been taking notes as I go along that serve as a roadmap.”

“Will you share them with me?” she asked.

I flipped back a few pages of my notepad and started to read. “The first chapter often addresses the researcher’s story: what brings me to this research and why am I interested in my topic.”

She asked, “How will this research change you?”

“I already have changed. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) stated that research is meant to be transformative, and that we do not merely analyze or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations. I struggle daily with my attempts to be mindful. I try not to be on autopilot as I drive to work. I observe the surroundings and notice subtle differences in the weather, the road conditions, and the vegetation. I delight in the new buds on trees and the row of daffodils waving in the breeze along the wood fence. When I get to the office, I really focus on what my front office folks are saying, and I try to really ‘be there’ for them by listening to them in more ways than just through their words. I have a small vase of flowers delivered every Monday to put on my desk. I do this partly to remind myself to be observant and not take things
for granted, and partly to reward myself for making each day new and novel by being more mindful. Even though I try to be mindful each day, I sometimes revert back to the taskmaster person I have been for the last 50-plus years.”

Laurie said, “I wonder if I will have an epiphany to write about.”

I responded, “Who knows? Ellis says you usually will with this type of research, and that people may be too caught up in living it to write about it. When I share mindfulness experiences with my administrative team, I don’t always take the time to journal about how it goes and what comments I hear from them as we experience different mindfulness activities. I feel as if I take two mindfulness steps forward and three back sometimes.”

“Should we hold each other accountable by checking with each other about our journaling efforts?” Laurie asked.

“That’s a good idea. Even if we just review each time we get together, it will help me continue to be more mindful in my writing,” I answered.

**Writing Ethnography Is Difficult**

Laurie lamented, “It is difficult it is to write effective autoethnography. Even though I am a former English teacher, I know the journey to get this on paper will be tough. This is especially difficult because I am trying not to have any pre-set goals about where this journey is taking me.”

“I’m glad to know you have expertise in writing. You can help me with time, characters, plot, scene, and action, which I know all have to be a part of the story,” I replied.

Laurie explained, “Action, tension, and conflict keep the reader interested in stories. We need to write and create the effect of reality, seeking verisimilitude.”
Her explanation was not new to me. I told her, “This journey is real to me. I know how autoethnography does not need to be about me as the main focus of the research, but that I as the author still enter the story as a character in the story, even if parts of it are about someone else (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). That is how I see my story progressing.”

I continued, “The article explains how Ellis strategically uses words in a manner that transforms a simple telling of stories into a complex interrogation of the meanings that are created from stories.”

**Why We Are Doing the Work**

“I want my writing to evoke readers to feel and think about my life and how it relates to my experiences,” Laurie said. “Maybe by me standing up and telling my story in an empowering way, I will not only help myself but maybe will help others as well.”

I nodded my head affirmatively. “And I hope that others will be able to relate and learn from my experiences as well. I think the benefits of autoethnography far outweigh the work and challenges of this type of research.” I reached over and picked up a book. “Chang (2008) observes that this type of research is a powerful tool for both researchers and practitioners who deal with human relations in multicultural settings, such as educators, social workers, medical professionals, clergy, and counselors.” After having studied ethnography for a year and read several powerful ethnographic research articles, I knew wanted to proceed with an autoethnography no matter how difficult it might prove.

I felt as if Laurie was reading my mind when she said, “Autoethnography is different and difficult. We do the scholarly work to set the stage for a more personal journey.” I decided not to share with her some of the feelings the work was dredging up in me.
I read Laurie a quote from *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing:*

On the whole, autoethnographers don’t want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel and care and desire. I guess if that’s a criticism—that it may affect your life; may even dredge up feelings you are not prepared to deal with now—well, maybe that’s a sign it’s making a difference. (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 24)

Laurie commented, “Nash (2004) expressed fully our reasoning for taking on this type of approach. He wrote that autoethnography liberates researchers from abstract, impersonal writings and touches readers’ lives by informing their experiences. That is how I want to write my story.”

My work was certainly not abstract and impersonal. I went back to Chang (2008) and explained to Laurie, “He noted three main benefits of using an autoethnographic approach. First, it enhances the cultural understanding of self. Second, it has the potential to transform self and others by stirring up self-reflection of listeners. Third, the self-transformation may bring about healing from the emotional scars of the past. He also states that self-transformation may be manifested in a variety of ways in the education field. Some may become more self-reflective in their daily praxis, and some may adopt more culturally relevant strategies.”

We again both agreed with Chang (2008) and expressed hope that each of our research outcomes would provide those benefits.

**Journaling to Storytelling**

“As you write your story, have you determined how you will see yourself in the story as a character?” Laurie asked.

I thought about this for a moment and then replied, “As an autoethnographer, I will position myself as the main character and others as supporting actors in my life story. Chang
(2008) reported that this is the most common approach to use, where the life of self is the primary focus of inquiry, and others are explored only in auxiliary relationships with self.”

Laurie recognized the names Lazarre (1996), Nash (2002), and Tillman-Healy (1996) and agreed their studies were examples of cases where the autoethnographer became the main character. I shared with her how I appreciated how raw and real Tillman-Healy’s work was and hoped I could capture details and emotions as clearly as she did in her autoethnography. We talked about how the authors were reflective in their writing, and I asked Laurie how she was planning to write in the same reflective manner.

Laurie answered, “I’m journaling by hand in bound notebooks about current experiences, and I have a separate journal for reliving past experiences. I feel that typing limits what I want to get down on paper. I try to use descriptive terms to capture my emotions every day. How are you collecting your data?”

“I am collecting, and will continue to collect, data in many ways. Muncey (2010) described the type of work I’ve done so far as “scribbling work.” Since early July of 2011, I have been sitting down almost daily to write. I get home, prop my feet up in my recliner, put the laptop on my lap, and pour out everything that happened that day. At first I was embarrassed by all of the strange thoughts and feelings that popped into my head and invariably went down on the paper.”

“My journaling is very personal as well,” Laurie acknowledged.

“When I first started journaling, I would wake up in the morning and scribble down a dream I had so I wouldn’t forget it, and later that day I would reflect on the dream when I journaled. Sometimes, in the evening or on a weekend, I would get carried away and look at the clock some 3 hours later and have a hard time believing I’d been journaling that long. Other
days I would find it difficult to get a word down on paper unless it was something like ‘Same concerns, different day.’” I didn’t tell her how it was sometimes frustrating to try to make the words express the experiences I was having and the limitations I felt with my journaling in capturing the feelings I had in the moment.

Laurie laughed. “I have some of the same experiences as I pour out my feelings onto the paper. Sometimes I don’t journal because I’m in a hurry. Sometimes I have a really difficult thing to write about and want to think about it before putting it on paper. Sometimes I have nothing to say, and sometimes I feel I have too much to say and not enough time to get it all down. I push myself through it—I read a book by Julie Cameron called The Artist’s Way (1992). She suggests several things to nurture your creativity. Journal every day, three pages, even if you have to write the same thing over and over. That will form a habit. Some days the words won’t flow, but just make them a habit. It is discipline to do it. A lot of my journal, particularly in the beginning, was just a stream of consciousness as I got back into the feel of writing.”

**Discerning Themes and Coding While Collecting Data at the Same Time**

Her words rang true. In much the same way, I had developed my own processes to get words on paper. I concurred, “What I find is how important it is that I journal the mundane, everyday occurrences. It is in those written thoughts that I have picked up themes.”

I told Laurie how at the same time I had been journaling, I had been discussing my field notes with my dissertation chair, Gordon.

“I have been talking to him as well,” Laurie said. She also had Gordon as her committee chair. I continued to explain that I had been reading more about ethnographic note taking. I asked her how she would be coding her notes to discern themes, and she explained that she hadn’t gotten that far yet. I told her that a couple of months previously, I had been able to reread
my written stream of consciousness and had started to see some patterns. I explained to her my process of writing notes about my notes and that that was how the stress of the job had come to the surface as my transcending theme.

Laurie asked me, “What else are you doing to collect data?”

I answered, “At the same time that I journal, I also collect artifacts in the way of work lists, writings, notes from meetings, and anything that I produce in written format in relationship to my work. I have gone back to those and highlighted anything I found pertinent to the study. I have those cataloged in boxes at home.”

“Will you be conducting any interviews?” Laurie asked.

I replied, “I am interviewing three different distinct groups of people to help me triangulate my data. First, I’m talking with fellow women superintendents. I hope to see whether they have similar challenges, whether they encounter stress, and how and whether they minimize the effects of stress, and I want to see if they have had challenges as a woman in the superintendency. Second, I will be interviewing board members. My protocol questions for interviewing the board members focus on how the board members and superintendent work together. Because there is such a close working relationship that must be developed, I want to know more about board members’ thoughts and how those relationships affect my work. Finally, I am conducting a group interview with my administrative team. Since I have been sharing mindfulness activities with the team, I am curious to hear their thoughts and see if my mindfulness work impacts them and our organization. Gathering these data will help me triangulate my research and further determine the findings I discover.”

“I will also be conducting interviews,” Laurie explained. “Do you have your protocols written for your interviews?”
I told her, “I will use an open-ended interview technique with general questions, but allow the participant to lead the direction of the data collection based on his or her responses. I actually have three different protocols with different questions for each group of participants. I’ll be interviewing the women superintendents and board members separately and interviewing my administrative team in a group interview setting.”

We commiserated on how analyzing these data would be time consuming and difficult. I discussed with her how Chang (2008) recommended having some road map and vision of what the final product will look like. I explained to Laurie how Wolcott (1990) tells researchers to keep the writing moving forward and get the essence of the study committed to paper, no matter how rough and incomplete it may seem. She told me she didn’t want to put anything on paper until she had finished collecting her data.

I asked her, “How much of a timeline will your research cover?”

She responded, “I am actually reaching back into my past and recreating memories on paper. I don’t have a specific time that I’m covering in my journaling.” I thought about her approach. Even though I was journaling only a particular time period, many of my thoughts revolved around my own memories of growing up, working, and being with my family. I knew those memories would impact my writing.

“How much longer will you be collecting data?” she asked.

“I will continue self-observing and recording my thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and actions in a narrative format and continue to analyze the data as I collect it and interpret it. I have most of my personal journaling done and coded, but I’m still adding to it,” I replied.

I pulled out some of my research and told her how Taylor and Bogdan (1984) observed that data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand. I pointed out, “My field notes contain my
innermost thoughts and objective facts. Chang (2008) stated that ethnographers used to keep separate journals, but now, especially in more contemporary ethnographic fieldwork, that challenges the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, and the division becomes more blurred. I prefer to just keep one journal.”

Laurie replied, “Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) encourage us to write thick, rich description and to write in the first person point of view. I think this will be important since we will be presenting details we personally see, experience, and remember from our own perspective and in our own voice.”

We continued discussing our journaling and coding methods. I told her what I had learned from my qualitative methods class, and we agreed that analyzing the data is very time consuming. I pulled out Saldana’s (2009) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* and said to Laurie, “As I move further down the path of study, I think I might use some of the work from his book to continually code, categorize, and analyze the data in a cyclical process.” I explained how Chang (2008) viewed coding as referring to assigning topical identifiers to different segments of the data.

I told Laurie, “I have already begun this process with my field notes, generating large groups of like themes, by putting side notes on these original field notes. My major themes from my early coding revolve around the demands of the job, stress, and developing relationships with my admin team and the board. I am further pulling those original field notes and other data into categories and sub-categories. The categories relate to the main specific demands of the job, how I internalize and deal with the stress, and how my mindfulness research is affecting relationships.”

“Are you finding the coding to be helpful?” she asked.
“Yes, I am,” I replied. “It has really changed the focus of how I’m reflecting on my approach to mindfulness. When I started, I thought I would be using mindfulness research to focus on how to have a high reliability organization. Although I’m using the knowledge from my research to affect my organization, what’s more important to me is how often the words stress and challenges of the job came up. I know the literature on how mindfulness can affect me personally.”

**Pitfalls We May Face**

We talked about the many potential pitfalls encountered when undertaking an autoethnographic study. Two pitfalls we discussed were dealing with people who view autoethnography as a substandard type of research, and becoming totally immersed in the work.

We agreed that we would have to deal with the fact that some researchers still view qualitative work as “soft science,” and I told her I thought my product could be seen as that because of the type of storytelling end product I envisioned. I read to her from Goodall (2000):

Interpretivists, whose arguments admittedly lacked the authority of a scientific warrant, were, in many places, accorded the second-rate status of dentists among our doctorate class. Impressionists were accused of abandoning the disciplines that supported and trained them; in some cases, they were asked, oughtn’t they try to get appointments in creative writing departments? (p 77.)

“Carolyn Ellis has been the champion for this type of writing; I know we’re both using several of her works. Thanks to her groundbreaking research, I know that the style of writing we’ll be using for our autoethnographies is becoming more accepted in academia,” Laurie stated. I agreed with her.

I shared a recent conversation I’d had with a friend. “I was telling my friend about my research project. He said to me, ‘That doesn’t sound like any dissertation I’m familiar with.
Where will your review of literature and your results chapters be?” I was defensive when I explained that ethnographic work can be written up differently. I felt I had to defend my methods.”

“We may have to be prepared for the reality that some people still have a traditional view of social science analysis,” Laurie replied.

“You’re right,” I answered. I dug around in my pile of books and found *Revision* (2009) by Carolyn Ellis. “Let me read to you what Carolyn says about autoethnographic writing,” I said. I began reading:

I can be rather insistent that sociologically enriched stories take their place alongside of or stand in for traditional analysis and theory. Mostly I write stories about experiences I have had that I think have sociological and human interest for readers. I care deeply that my stories have the potential to impact and improve social conditions. I make the case that this can happen through examining lives one at a time and encouraging voice person to person. (p. 15)

“May I see the book?” Laurie asked. I handed it to her. She read a few pages of the introduction and said, “This is a good part. Let me read it to you.” She began:

Effective autoethnographies are not victim tales, on the contrary, writing autoethnography well produces survivor tales for the writer and those who read them. Accomplished autoethnographers do not proclaim how things are or how life should be lived, but instead strive to open up a moral and ethical conversation with readers about the possibility of living life well. (Ellis, 2009, p. 17)

“That is what we want with our stories, Teena!” Laurie exclaimed.

“You’re right. I hope that will be the result,” I answered. I continued, “Is this whole doctoral process consuming your life, as it is mine? Chang (2008) claimed that can be another critical potential problem–since autoethnography is a highly self-reflective and introspective
process, unless there is a methodical way of keeping a distance from this process, the autoethnographer could easily fall into self-absorption.” I continued, “Did you know that some researchers view the autoethnographer as narcissistic and self-indulgent? (Holt, 2003; Salzman, 2002; Sparkes, 2002).”

“Yes,” she answered. “But centering yourself through mindfulness and writing about your journey doesn’t mean you are narcissistic. In psychology, the term is used to describe both normal self-love and unhealthy self-absorption; I view our work as learning to center ourselves. I believe that by just making me more aware, my study will be of inherent benefit to me as a researcher and a person. Plus, this is nothing new to me. I’m an introvert and I talk to myself all the time. I’ve spent most of my life alone, so I am self-absorbed.” Laurie made a face and we both laughed.

We discussed the many other pitfalls we faced, including over-emphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; exclusive reliance on memory; and negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives (Chang, 2008).

Laurie asked, “Aren’t you afraid you’ll be disclosing too much about yourself and your work? I’m worried that if I really write the way I feel, I’ll never get a job in education again.”

“I have the same concerns,” I assured her. “The reality is that by doing this type of study, we will be taking risks. I’ve had several conversations with Dr. Gates throughout my journey regarding the ethics of doing this work and how to uphold ethical research standards and maintain my own values, while at the same time not putting myself too ‘out there.’ I panicked when I asked my business manager, who is very tech savvy, to help me set up my documents to be able to write side notes on my field notes–she said, ”Just forward me your field notes and I’ll work on them.” Of course I didn’t do that because of the personal nature of my journal–instead I
had her guide me by watching over my shoulder. I was surprised by my new awareness of how strongly I reacted to having others see my honest and candid writing. My writing is so personal, and supporting actors in my story may be easily recognized, so I’ll be writing using composite fictional characters that embody the characteristics related to the issues dealt with in my story.”

**Personal Worries and Reflections**

“Did you receive approval from the Instructional Review Board?” she asked.

“Yes. Even though I will treat any supporting participants in this confidential way, I still received the approval and have been having all participants sign informed consent documents before interviewing them.”

“You know that informed consent is different in autoethnography because of the nature of changing focus and possible change in participants,” Laurie commented.

“I’ll work to minimize intrusions on people’s privacy,” I said, “and I hope I will not disclose details in a way that could identify a participant in the story. I’ve learned from Ellis (2009) about focusing on how to write from an ethic of care, where the focus is on protecting those we write about from undue harm. I know that an autoethnography can be so personal that I will be putting myself ‘on the line’ by sharing intimate and sometimes non-flattering descriptive-realistic writing about myself.” I didn’t share with Laurie some of my innermost worries about having people close to me read my dissertation. I was also concerned about their finding out less than positive details about my work and life.

“And you know Gordon will help us make sure we don’t put ourselves too ‘out there,’ to use your phrase, don’t you?” Laurie interjected.

“I hope so,” I responded nervously. I asked Laurie, “Have you thought about the limitations to our autoethnographic studies?”
She recited, “Limitations may include avoiding bias, having open-ended questions that may be subject to interpretation, and the possibility the study will not be as generalizable as a standard qualitative or quantitative study.”

“Right. I know my study will not be generalizable because it’s a self-study at a specific place with a specific group of participants within a particular timeframe. What I do hope for is that others will learn something from my story,” I told Laurie.

“Teena,” Laurie said, “we need to explain in our dissertations the kinds of decisions we make and on what ground we make them. Goodall (2000) told us to trust the process and believe that we will find the clues to lead to a connection of the gap in literature with the creation of a storyline. I think we have interesting research data and if you’re willing, we can work together as a team to share our important results with educators.”

I laughed. “I don’t know what those important results are yet, but yes, I think our projects will coincide with each other.”

**Mindfulness Becoming a Part of Life**

When we finished this discussion, we got ready to go to dinner. The innkeeper recommended we go to Jimella’s Market, so we drove a few blocks to the small restaurant. While driving, I told Laurie, “I just recently met with a dietitian at Hood River Hospital. The dietitian told me how professionals under stress often ‘stress eat.’ Several articles I read about stress confirmed what the dietitian said. I found that as I progressed towards a healthier lifestyle, I wanted to be mindful of how I eat. The dietitian described the importance of mindfulness when eating—when she said that I got excited. The dietician was pleasantly surprised that I had been studying mindfulness techniques, and she said that was exactly what I needed to do to help me with healthy eating. She encouraged me to set a goal of eating mindfully at least three times a
week. Let’s really focus on our meal this evening and enjoy it in a mindful manner and see how we do!”

“And tell me how we are going to be mindful as we eat?” Laurie asked.

“It’s important to me to be conscious of the colors of the food, the smells, and the tastes. I don’t want rush through our meal–let’s slow down and really enjoy the food.”

“I tried to be mindful once when I was eating breakfast,” Laurie joked, “but I said to myself, ‘I have to flipping go or I’ll be late for work!’ I do believe it is the way I will become tall and thin if I do it–well, maybe not tall, but definitely thinner. I just have to work on that myself.”

We laughed. The waitress seated us at a small table near the back wall, where it was quiet. A lighted candle was on the table, and the quiet atmosphere was relaxed and conducive to warm conversation. We looked over the menu while sipping our wine. I ordered pan-seared Alaskan halibut served with roasted leeks, Yukon potatoes, and lentils with a lemon vinaigrette.

“Tell me about your family and growing up,” Laurie requested.

I shared with her stories of how as kids, my brother and I would have to ride on the back of a hay baler and tie any of the knots on the twine that held the bales together if the baler tier wasn’t working. “We wore bandanas over our faces and were completely covered with dust and hayseeds when the baler finally stopped and we could jump down off of the hard twine holders to the ground,” I told her. “It was dangerous to stick your hands into the moving equipment and quickly tie a square knot, but we didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

I talked about working in my family’s small sawmill, having to pull the rough edges of the boards off of the rollers onto the slab pile. “We would work until it was almost dark. Each of my family members had a job. My dad was the Sawyer, putting the logs onto the log carriage
and controlling the six-foot saw blade, my mom pulled the boards off of the saw onto the rollers, I pulled the slab pieces off, and my two brothers piled the finished boards.”

I told her of a special time when we worked long hours to complete an order of cottonwood blocks for a tramway company. I explained to Laurie how cottonwood was full of water and when the blocks were sawed, streams of sticky, wet, wood-smelling water would spray out on us as the saw cut through the wood. The 8-inch by 8-inch blocks were very heavy, and it took Mom and all of us kids to take the block off the rollers when it was cut. “When Dad and Mom got the check for the completed order,” I concluded, “they invited all of us kids into the study. Dad ceremoniously put the three thousand dollar check in each of our hands and said, ‘You just helped buy your mother a new stove and refrigerator. You should feel proud of yourself.’ We did.”

I also told Laurie about getting a job at the local restaurant and working more than 40 hours a week while still going to school. I described how a favorite teacher of mine had called me to his desk after class, stating that he was worried about me. He asked why I was sleeping in his class much of the time. When I told him about my work load, he said, ‘You can just continue to sleep as often as you need to. You are getting an A in my class and I know you do all of the schoolwork. Do what you need to do.’ I told Laurie how I then would even pinch myself repeatedly to stay awake because after that I didn’t want to disappoint the teacher.

Laurie related that she had worked a lot growing up as well, and at 16 had worked a full-time job, just as I had. I noticed that much of our conversation related to “work” referred to jobs we’d had from the time we were young.

When the meal arrived, we took a moment to look at the artistry on the plate. A beautiful, lightly browned halibut filet sat on top of a small portion of lentils and potatoes. Bright green,
lightly cooked pea pods and dark green kale fanned out from the center of the plate. I took small bites and chewed the food slowly, enjoying the tastes. The crunch of the lentils pleasantly surprised me. When I chewed, it was slowly. If my mind wandered to other thoughts, I gently returned my attention to chewing and the movement of my jaw. As I prepared to swallow the food, I followed its movement from the back of my tongue and into my throat. I swallowed and followed the food until I no longer had the sensation of food remaining. I took a deep breath and exhaled.

I smiled to myself and thought of how in the past I would have ordered the T-bone steak with a baked potato and how I would have dived in to eat without really paying attention to the food. The meal was delicious. When the waitress returned she told us the ingredients were fresh and that they took pride in serving healthful, organic meals.

Laurie admitted, “Okay, I really did enjoy the food, and I did notice how different it felt to really pay attention to what and how I ate it.”

“I agree. I feel like being mindful in my eating habits will help me not only with stress eating, but also to focus on continually being present in the moment. When I have trouble staying mindful, I sometimes have to use tricks like counting how many times I chew my food, eating with my non-dominant hand, and making the meal last at least 20 minutes.” What I didn’t tell Laurie was that I battle extra weight and that eating mindfully had still not made a difference in how much I was eating. I also didn’t share how much I wished the slow evening meal was the norm, not the exception in my life at that time.

We drove back to the cottages in silence. It was interesting how having the space of silence helped me be more mindful.
Later, as I lay in bed, I pondered all that I’d heard that day, and I began to shape in my mind the way I would tell my experiences and my journey through a story that would include Laurie as one of the main characters.

The next morning, we were up and moving by 7 A.M. We both commented that we got to “sleep in a bit” as we are both normally on the job and working by 7. We shared a cup of coffee, and I proceeded to tell Laurie my plan for my autoethnography, at least a skeletal version of how I could see the chapters being laid out.

“Would you mind being a character in my story of my mindfulness journey?” I asked.

“As long as you make me a tall, thin, gorgeous brunette and no one will recognize me in the writing,” she answered.

“I’ll guard your identity as I put the story together. The storyline will be based on how we have planned out our next year of study and writing.”

We restated our plan of meeting in a month. “Let’s set a date for our next weekend work time for the last weekend of April or sometime in May. Will that work?” Laurie asked.

“That will work fine for me. Let’s plan on reviewing our literature. I’ll bring my tote full of research articles and books that are all focused on mindfulness and meditation—I hope you’ll bring yours too. Then we can compare our ‘ah-has’ we are gaining through our literature review when we meet again,” I said.

“That’s a great idea. I find it interesting that I’m using a more Eastern philosophy of meditation, while you’re using the current Western research on mindfulness and organizations,” Laurie observed.

Shortly after setting our schedules and goals, we packed up and left in our separate directions, Laurie driving north while I turned to the south. My mind was racing as I drove away
from the cottages; I was excited about the work I was doing. As I went over the events of the past 20 hours, I was amazed by how much clarity I had gained by working with Laurie. I gained a renewed enthusiasm to continue my study and looked forward to meeting with her again. We decided that we would meet once a month for the next 6 months, each time at a different location. We would continue to share our progress and use our time together to analyze and write about the data we were collecting. This would give us adequate time to delve deep into our own journaling, conduct the research with our participants, code and sort data, and write our results. I turned my thoughts toward home and turned up the jazz on the radio. What a great weekend!
CHAPTER THREE

DOING THE WORK OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

Remembering the First Few Months of the New Job

“Joel,” I said, “It was a great weekend. I actually got a lot of work done on my dissertation.” I just had to give Joel a quick call to tell him how much I enjoyed his presentation at the cohort class and how I enjoyed visiting with him.

“That’s great!” Joel replied. “It sounds like you and the mystery woman got along great. Now I have a question from the real world. Are you learning anything from all of this journaling you’re doing?”

“I think it’s a little too early to tell, Joel. Do you remember when I called you last spring right after I got the job in Georgetown?” I asked.

“How could I forget?” he replied. “I thought I was going to have to come rescue you or Fred, the superintendent you were replacing.”

We both laughed. “You’re right, I was pretty intense,” I replied. That time Joel referred to was about a month after I’d started keeping a journal. I had been offered a job in the new district and the decision was weighing heavily on me. One entry talks about dealing with two districts at one time:

_The Georgetown school district offers me a personal services contract for 10 extra days for transition activities. I think at the time what a wonderful way for me to learn from the old superintendent and be prepared to hit the ground running when I get to Georgetown. Again what I thought would be good to begin with becomes a nightmare for me. Not only am I worried about Chaperall, the budget here, and negotiating with the unions concerning the state salary decrease, I then double my worry when I get to Georgetown each time I go down there and find they have the same problems to deal with. I think I make a verbal agreement with the old superintendent leaving Georgetown—I tell him how_
I plan in Chaperall to get as much done and have all the negotiating done prior to my leaving for Georgetown. He assures me that he too will take care of all the tough jobs before he leaves. My stress level began to build and build and build. I remember when I first came to Chaperall how the previous superintendent had left many things undone because he had issues to deal with in his new district and I vowed that I would not do that if I ever left Chaperall. I just thought it was the right thing to do to make sure that I left the place better than when I got there. I placed huge deadlines and piled work onto my plate for both districts. It was about that time when my health became affected. I took my blood pressure and it was sky high. My doctor prescribed more medication and Xanax to calm me down. It seemed to work and I continued my frenzied pace to try to get everything done.

Right around the time I had written that, I had called Joel to debrief, as I often did to cope with the difficulties I was facing. He said, “Dammit Teena, just do the best you can. You have to leave something for the new guy to do.”

It helped to talk to him, but I still put tremendous pressure on myself to get everything done. A later entry talks about my last day at Chaperall:

*I was so proud of myself on my last day at Chaperall. I had every single thing that was on my list to do completed, and I had made all the tough decisions and had union memorandums of understanding all completed. I was so happy that I was leaving the new superintendent in a really good position to start his new job. Naïvely, I figured that the old superintendent in Georgetown was working as feverishly as I was to do the same thing there to prepare me to have an easy transition into the school district. Each time when I had gone to Georgetown during my transition days, the old superintendent assured me that things would be done for me when I got there. He explained that there were four union groups and that he would have memorandums of understanding done for each of the groups. He also said he would have all the major budget cuts approved by the board and all I would need to do is to enact the cuts when I got there and things would be fine. How stupid am I to think that everybody has that same workaholic mentality that everything has to be perfect? Were my expectations too high? Was there a*
reason that the superintendent before me left the tough things for me to do because I was a woman? Was he just a tired retiree who wanted to be gone and gave me lip service? Or did he try to get things accomplished and just couldn’t get the job done?

“Do you remember how frustrated you were when you had to negotiate contracts in your old district and your new district?” Joel asked.

“Yes, and then I remember how bad I felt once I learned the leaving superintendent had had to deal with two surgeries in his last few months on the job,” I said.

“And didn’t you tell me he had complications with one of the surgeries?” he asked.

“Yes, but I didn’t know that at the time. I just thought he was slacking off and leaving it all for me to do,” I said.

“I think you learned some things from him. It just took you awhile to admit it,” Joel teased.

“You’re probably right.” I admitted. Our conversation caused me to remember when I wrote in one of my journal entries:

When I told the office staff that the previous superintendent told me that July was the quiet time and that I felt like I don’t have a minute to spare, they said the reason he thought it was the quiet time is because he took off to go to Spirit Lake every year during this time and it was quiet for him. Is work harder for me, or do I work harder than him? If that is measured by what has been completed by the time I got here, then I definitely work harder than he does. But what does that mean–am I a better person because I work harder, or do I feel that I have to work harder to be a better person?

One of the things that Fred did on his last day as superintendent was to hand me a book called Sabbath (1999) by Wayne Muller. The book talks about how to plan for a day of rest each week to renew the spirit. At the time, I had questions about my thinking that I expressed in my journal:
Does he know more than I do? Does he get it? Am I choosing the wrong values by working myself every day of the week and not taking downtime? As part of my study of mindfulness, and as a commitment to my husband, we have decided to renew our time of resting on the Sabbath. We have not done this for years. Maybe Fred does have the right idea. Maybe he was trying to tell me something by not having everything done that doesn't really matter in the long run. This I guess I'll find out as I start this journey over the year.

I was lost in my thoughts for a moment and was quiet on the phone as Joel asked me a question. Then he chided, “Yoohoo, anyone there?”


“And I was just going to say that maybe this journaling is giving you some insight,” Joel said. “I think I’ll reserve judgment until I get your full attention.” We both laughed and I agreed with him.

“Sometimes I’m not so sure, Joel,” I told him. “I have a long way to go with my study. On another note, did you have principals go to the RTI conference in Spokane?”

“Teena, you have to remember we’re on a very strict budget here. I did have one principal listen in on the k-20 system though. Why do you ask? Was it a good conference?” Joel asked.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “I had one of the principals call me from Spokane while she was at the conference. She told me that the keynote speaker was talking about my old district and sharing how Chaperall and their leadership team have worked hard to make their strategic plan a working document. The speaker went on to show pictures of the strategic plan as it looks on the bulletin board of the Chaperall school district board room. The reason the principal called me was to tell me that she turned to the people sitting around her and said, ‘That superintendent
is ours now.’ The principal seems to have a very high opinion of me and I have barely even started.”

“So what's the problem? That’s a nice problem to have,” Joel answered.

I continued, “I’m hearing that throughout the community—people say, ‘You are the one we wanted. You were the top candidate and we knew you would be a good fit.’ Nothing like adding stress to the moment. I’d almost rather be under-promised and over-delivered. My worry is that I will be overpromised, and who knows how much I can deliver?”

Joel laughed. “Teena,” he said, “for you it’s all around that feeling of having to live up to expectations and having to be perfect. That's probably your biggest stressor. You want to do a good job—you want to be known for your leadership style and qualities, and at the same time you want to lead a balanced life. Slow down, girl, and get a life.”

Joel had a way of saying it like it was. I smiled as I thought about how much I appreciated Joel’s friendship and mentorship. I thought to myself after I hung up, Is this possible? Especially when I looked back at the journal entry where I noticed how unbalanced I was:

*It is Saturday morning. I’ve yelled at the dog, I’ve yelled at my husband, and I’m frustrated with me. How might you get everything done? I have so many things to do and I don't feel like I have enough time to get them done. I’m frustrated because I feel like I have to prepare for my preliminary examination, I have to sign up for my classes this fall, I have to figure out how to pay for being a doctoral student, and I still have to find time with my husband and my family and my friends. I am totally overwhelmed once again; I don’t know that I can do this. I’m stressed because I don’t seem to have time to study for my preliminary exams, which I don't know how to study for, and I'm trying to move up the exam date because I’ll be going to China and I feel like it’s just adding to the pressure cooker. I have to get signed up for my classes by today or I’ll have to pay late fees. I haven’t paid for summer school yet I have to get that done or I’m sure there are late fees for that. Gary and I had a battle last night talking about money and me being*
worried that with him not working we may not have enough money to do the things we need to and pay all of the bills. I know I’m putting stress on him but I’m frustrated that he hasn’t been out job searching. On one hand, I want him home; he does he keeps our lives organized and he really is available at my beck and call and is a great support for me. I haven’t had much time to really consider his feelings because I’ve been so focused on myself and this comes back to that same worry I had earlier–am I going to push him away by my frustrations to be able to keep up with what I have to do and am I going to alienate him by not taking the time to listen to his feelings. There’s got to be a way to balance this out. I can’t lose the person most important to me by trying to get things done on the list. This makes me think of the activity that we did at the administrative retreat–am I so busy trying to impress Dr. Gates and the committee that I lose my personal focus? How many other people have had their marriages and families suffer as they’ve gone through the doctoral process? I understand why people take a sabbatical to get this accomplished. It seems like too much. And then Gary kindly tells me how do you eat an elephant? And he says remember one little bite at a time–you can do this–we will make it together–it’ll be okay. I sure hope he’s right because I truly depend on him as I go through this process. So today I hope to get signed up for my classes, fill out my FAFSA, and figure out a way to junk into little pieces the work I have to do get done before my Preliminary exams.

Was my journaling giving me some insight? I looked back over what I had written a few short months ago after I had been away from the district for a few days:

When I get back I have lots of things to catch up on but I seem to have a renewed sense of energy to do what I have to do. One of the principals spent some time talking to me and thanked me. She said, “Teena thank you so much for sharing with us mindfulness activities. Yesterday morning I went out onto the deck with a cup of coffee and I sat there looking at the beautiful flowers. I thought to myself it is okay that I’m doing this because Teena gave me permission to be mindful and enjoy the daily moments.”

I don’t know if she’s just telling me that because she wants me to know she was listening or if she really means it–I think she means it. It reminds me of me what I felt like when
my dad finally gave me permission to play. It was a few years after my mom died and Gary and I had both the greenhouse business and we were both working full time.

Before we moved up to help my parents when my mom had cancer, we actually did have a more balanced life. We used to do fun things like camping, hiking, and traveling. But ever since we moved up to my parent’s home town we were faced with nothing but work. Both Gary and I had felt that in order to gain my dad’s approval we had to be workaholics. And so we were.

It was such an interesting conversation. I remember it very clearly. Dad told me that he and Mom had worked really hard so that they could travel and have fun in their retirement. Then Mom got cancer and everything changed. She died and Dad wondered ‘why have I been working so hard all this time and I have no one to share with.’

I don’t remember the exact words but I do remember Dad telling me that life goes by really fast and you do have to stop and smell the roses sometimes. This unorthodox way of telling me that he might have been wrong by having this workaholic mentality settled on the outside of my already crusted over mindset. At the time it sat there like a parasite trying to worm itself into my body. It has taken a number of years since that conversation for it to actually hit home.

I am now the same age my mom was when she died of cancer. I note my own mortality and I question how quickly life goes by and have I stopped to smell the roses?

This is another reason I am thankful Dr. Gates has insisted I look at mindfulness studies at the very base of the dissertation process. I believe that just as I am peeling the layers of the onion of the school district I am peeling the layers of the onion of me. I think this will help me understand what makes me tick—why am I so driven, why do I work so hard, why do I not take the time to enjoy the things around me and listen as carefully as I should to others’ stories. Just sitting here writing down my thoughts helps me be mindful and think back on the process of my days and my interactions with those around me and my environment.

I think Joel might have been right. I was noticing some small changes.


**Doctorate + Work + Family = Stress**

I called Gordon and told him how the study weekend with Laurie went. He said, “Teena, you are making a lot of progress. Do you remember when you called me a few months ago ready to quit your program?”

I thought back on that conversation and the successive ones over the last few months. Here is the conversation I’d had with him those few months prior:

“Okay, Dr. Gates. I am ready to quit my doctoral program,” I had said. “I feel frustrated and overwhelmed because the job I’m taking on is suddenly way more difficult than I thought it was going to be. I feel frustrated because I don’t feel like I can remember all of the work done 4 years ago when I was going great guns on my doctoral program.”

I felt far less cocky and far more unsure of myself. I had shared those fears with Dr. Gates in a roundabout way. I also hadn’t told him how stressed I felt when he replied offhandedly, “You are a strong writer, as I recall–you can do this.”

“I just don’t have the same passion for the study I started 4 years ago. It doesn’t seem meaningful to me right now,” I complained.

Gordon replied, “Teena, just write. Take the next few months and just write everything you are thinking about as you transition into this new district and the frustrations you feel as you work through getting back into your doctoral research.”

“Really?” I asked. I breathed a sigh of relief. “I can do that.”

“And reread Becker (2007) and read the part where he encourages the throwing out of ideas as a rough draft. That’s all you need to do right now. This will come together for you,” he counseled.
I remembered back on how this was something I’d thought I could do and how I’d spent the next few weeks journaling, and then I had called Gordon. He had asked me to send excerpts from my first month of journaling.

“Hello Gordon,” I’d said. “I sent you an email with my journaling to date attached. I just wanted to make you aware of a really strange entry. I’ve been writing in my journal about vivid dreams I’ve been having. I don’t want you to think I am strange.”

“Don’t worry, Teena,” he’d replied. “You’re doing exactly what I asked you to do—journal everything that comes to mind. You’re just collecting data, and later in the study you’ll try to make meaning of it all. Just a minute and I’ll pull up your email and read it.”

I had been stressed about what he would think of this journal entry:

That evening I have a vivid and strange dream. I hesitate even sharing it but I feel it’s important because my subconscious seems to be stressing as much as my waking conscious mind about the pressures ahead of me. I dream...I am lying in bed. My chair of my committee is lying in bed next to me. We are both fully clothed. We are talking about intimate details of my work life and what I am thinking. I feel like it is okay to talk to him in such a personal manner. It is a good feeling because I feel like I am being listened to and what I say is important. My husband comes into the room and says what are you doing in bed together? I say this doesn’t mean anything Gary–I am only in bed with him long enough to finish my dissertation. He gets angry and I continue to try to placate him with Look we have all of our clothes on—this doesn’t mean anything. Then I wake up. I spend most of the morning pondering such a strange dream. Do I feel that if I just do what my chair asks and do it the way he wants me to, I will be successful? Did I internalize the conversation I heard on the scratchy recording of the class session where Dr. Gates shares how important it is to really get along with your chair and listen to them so they can help guide you through the process? Do I have a worry that I will push my husband away with my focus on this work and my new job and he will be having idle time and will feel like I value my research more than him? I don’t tell Gary the dream...it is
too weird and he will wonder why I had it. Better for me to ponder and try to figure out or maybe just chalk it up to how unbalanced I feel right now.

Gordon had read the entry. “Teena,” he had said. “Just keep writing. Don’t put a value or judgment on what you put in your journal. Just try to be descriptive and detailed. As I said, you will make meaning of your writing as you work through the research process. I will send you some new articles about mindfulness. Read them and we’ll talk.” Later that day I got three new articles from Gordon, one on high reliability organizations, one on health benefits of mindfulness, and one on mindfulness and school reform. I had thought to myself, *When am I going to have time to read all of this research and do everything else?*

Back in the present, Gordon asked me, “Now aren’t you glad you didn’t give up?”

“I haven’t decided yet, Gordon,” I replied. I asked him more about my preliminary exams and we talked for a few more minutes. I left the conversation with a renewed resolve to keep journaling and reading research articles.

**Getting to Know the Board**

Jane called. She had just had her board meeting where the board discussed how they would be evaluating her performance. She started out with a sigh: “Wow, it was a stressful board meeting.”

“What was most stressful, Jane?” I asked.

“Well, they listed several things that they would like to see accomplished in a year. I cautioned them that not everything on the list could be done in 1 year. I feel like I’ve been run through the wringer and I feel that their expectations of me may be more than I can accomplish,” Jane explained.
“Jane, I’ve had similar feelings as I started this year. Knowing that you feel the same way as I do does a lot to help my mental state! I’m not in this alone,” I laughed.

“You aren’t,” Jane said. “Our meeting lasted 3 hours, and when I got home I was absolutely exhausted.”

“What were some of your goals?” I asked. Jane told me the goals she and the board had developed, and then she asked me what goals I had.

“I just did this with the board a few weeks ago. Let me pull them up on my computer and I’ll read them to you.” I found them and began reading: “1) Change the culture of the high school and help change the perception of the high school by members of the community. A. We want Georgetown High School to be one of the top schools in the U.S. (long-term goal).

2) Work towards passing a levy—levy preparations the first year to build public capacity to understand responsibility for funding education. 3) Focus on the most important things first, and continue working with principals and teachers to focus our efforts on the most important things to help build academic achievement. 4) Keep everyone working towards the same goals—make sure stakeholders are in the loop early in the process. 5) Develop a long-term plan for the closure of a building.”

“Wow, you have loftier goals than I do,” Jane commented. “How did you determine your goals?”

“I spent the first 90 days since I was hired in March listening to the board, the community, parents, students, and staff. I then asked the board to give me their expectations. From there I wrote up what I thought I heard and passed them back to the board, asking them if I heard the expectations accurately. I had already been told when I first got the job that they wanted me to
“I know, Teena, if your board is like mine, those goals are what they will evaluate you on. Let me rephrase that—those are the written goals they will evaluate you on. You will still need to develop the board/superintendent relationship, and that is key the first year in a new district,” Jane said.

“I know. I’m really stressed about that because I feel that with these other goals, I’m running around like a chicken with her head cut off trying to put out fires and begin the legwork to get things done,” I lamented.

We discussed ways that we might work together to help each other with our set of goals we had for the year. We discussed how important it was to build solid, trusting relationships with our boards and agreed it was important to really listen and paraphrase back expectations. When we finished our conversation, we both felt better and had plans on how to work on our board relationships.

Jane changed the subject. “Teena, I have a situation I’m trying to deal with in the office.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I have a couple of women in my office who aren’t getting along with each other, for one thing. The other is every day, each time one of the central office staff comes through the door, they have to spend 10 minutes or so catching up with each other. I’ve been trying to make changes, but it isn’t going very well,” Jane said.

“Have you done any personality styles training?” I asked. “That’s one of the first things I did when I got here in order to learn what their personality styles were and what they need to do to get along with each other, and with me.”
“Did it work?” Jane asked. “Nothing seems to be working for me right now. It’s tough to work in an environment where there’s underlying hostility between staff. I had a speaker come in from the Educational Service District and conduct colors training, a personality inventory that helps participants see how to communicate with each other and what is important for their personality in doing a good job.”

“That’s similar to what I did,” I said. “I thought it was a good training. Didn’t it work for you?”

Jane replied, “I was amazed to find out our business manager, the personnel manager, the HR director, and I were almost identical in our personality inventory. We all wanted to do a good job, to be rule followers, to please our boss, etc. We talked that day about the importance of understanding how to communicate with each other and not let things build up. I set the expectation of communicating disagreements in a respectful and positive manner. I thought the day went well—I have several comments from staff members who felt that the training was valuable and helpful to them in their jobs. I thought I had fixed the problem . . . Little did I know!”

“I’m sorry that didn’t work for you, Jane. What are you doing now?” I asked.

“Well,” she replied, “yesterday I could tell that the two of them had reached an impasse—they didn’t even treat each other or talk to each other politely. It all blew up when I heard two of them arguing about some petty detail in the office.”

“What did you do about that?” I asked curiously.

Jane said, “I called them in and asked them to sit down. I shut my door and turned to look at them. I told them I had to have a cohesive team if we are to work together. I was honest. I told them I had to have a team that gets along and is respectful to each other. I told them that I
noticed them criticizing each other in very subtle ways by rolling their eyes, crossing their arms in front of them, or pretending they didn’t hear each other. They were both committed to the job, but not to working with each other,” Jane said sadly.

“That is really too bad, Jane,” I sympathized. “The central office I worked in before here had great staff. I knew the two women I worked with totally had my back and that they worked hard to settle their differences and not have me stress about it, and I think the team here will be good as well once we all learn how to work together.”

I explained that the team I had developed in Chaperall was not cohesive when I first got there and that we’d had to work together to make ourselves become a working team. I suggested to Jane that she plan a lot of communication and mentioned that if I were in her shoes, I would be meeting with the staff on a weekly basis to have them work on things that would help them. I suggested, “Why don’t you give them a directive to spend this next week being overtly polite to each other—to pay attention to any contemptuous remarks, attitudes, or gestures, and to refrain from doing them?”

Jane said she would try that and let me know how it worked. She said, “You know, personnel issues are some of the most difficult things we have to deal with. Whether it’s removing a bad teacher, responding to complaints from the public about an employee, or teaching people how to get along, each of these types of human resources situations cause me stress.”

“I have to agree with you there,” I said. “It’s because we are dealing with emotions and the lives of people.” I shared with her a few situations where those decisions were not only stressful, but sorrowful for me as well. “It’s never fun to tell someone they don’t have a job anymore,” I concluded.
“I have to get going, Teena. Thanks so much for listening to me today. I appreciate you listening to my board worries and my personnel difficulties. I know you are confidential, too. I’ll talk to you soon,” Jane said as she hung up the phone.

Setting the Stage for a Good Start

Joel called about a month later to ask me how I was planning my 2-day retreat with my new administrative team. I had emailed him the day before to ask some questions about my agenda. “Well, you think you’re ready?” he asked.

“I’ve spent a lot of time preparing for it,” I answered. “Going into the retreat, my plans are to spend much of the time dealing with expectations of myself and expectations of the team as a team and as individuals. As we work together to determine how we will work together, I think these next 2 days will be very important in setting the stage of how the school year will go. I have been working on the agenda for this retreat since last week and have been continually making small changes. But I’m really excited now to have the entire admin staff on board so that everybody will hear the same things at the same time. Did you get a chance to review the agenda I sent you?” I asked.

Joel answered in the affirmative and we spent some time describing some changes he would incorporate. I wrote down his suggestions and promised to give him a call later to let him know how it had gone.

As I looked back at my journal entries for that week, I noticed the stress in the tone of my words as I described the retreat:

When I look at the entries from July, I feel the same wave of overwhelming dread—I can’t get this all done. This last week was one of the most stressful since I have been here. It was the week I gave the administrators at our admin retreat the expectations I have of them and they did the same for me. It was also the same week I had a work session with
the board to do the same thing. These two events took me hours to prepare for both mentally and physically.

I knew I only had so much time to share my leadership philosophy, goals, and my expectations and to set the tone for a good start of the year. The first meeting was held at the ESD (Educational Service District) in their Columbia room. It is a beautiful room with all the modern technology devices you can imagine. I worked with the ESD to prepare for staff being there. I get up at 4:30 in the morning to drive down there and make sure that the breakfast materials are ready, that the room is set up so I feel comfortable for the start of the day. I have developed thick notebooks with all of the materials that I plan to cover with the staff.

On the walls I have sticky chart paper listing the purpose of the meeting and the desired outcomes. I also have brought several activities hands-on physical materials to make a point as I give my presentations. I don’t feel nervous because I’ve developed a script and walked through the details several times previous to the meeting. The first day goes off without a hitch.

One of the principals volunteers to do the relationship-building activities and the first day she asks us to bring items or pictures that symbolize some of the work we do. She asks us to bring something that symbolizes our support system—I bring a picture of my family, something symbolizing the superintendents I work with, and something symbolizing friends. Others have similar support symbols. One of the principals shares a book called the Matthew Shepard story. It is about a young man in Wyoming who was killed as a hate crime because he was gay. The principal is good friends with the mother of the boy who was killed. We talk a lot about social justice and making sure our school allows for the diversity of students no matter what their religion, their sexual orientation, or their race. It was a rich, heartfelt discussion and it led to the next question where we were supposed to talk about what we are most passionate about. I share my son’s small baby shoes, Converse hi tops, and say the reason they’re hanging in my office is to remind me that every parent that comes through the door loves their child and wants the very best for that child and that I need to remember that my decision may and will affect that child’s welfare.
I say I am passionate about kids and that I love the work I do. I share that I have been in the business for almost 33 years of educating students and I feel a strong urgency to make sure all students have equal opportunities to be safe, to be educated and to be heard in our society.

Others share similar passions and again we have a good discussion about our roles as leaders in the education field. The next thing we share is what frustrates us in our current system or roles. I share my frustration about not knowing the budget situation with the federal government and that we have to continue to do business not knowing what our revenue will be. Others share frustrations with teachers who don’t take their job seriously, one person brought a piece of cheese and shared that she doesn't like whiners, one person shared the frustration of having so many new role this year, and some shared their frustration that some of their school reform initiatives are not working and their assessment scores are still low.

The time we take for the relationship building activities are well worth it. It sets the tone for how the rest of the meeting retreat will proceed. I find it interesting that these staff members, even if they've had more experience than me in this district and in education, look to me as their leader. When we discuss norms and expectations it is clear they are looking for someone to help them grow in their own role and help them be better at what they do.

They list several expectations of me and when I get a chance I will type them out to look over. Sometimes when I've done that for several different groups I feel that they want God and I'm not going to be able to measure up. I like to see however what people want in a leader because it gives me a really good idea of how I need to proceed forward. One of the things I do after the principals and directors have given me their expectations, I share with them the expectations given to me from my previous group of principals. It was very interesting to note the similarities between the two. I have been hired to be a leader and they are expecting great things from me. This is very scary.

When I talked to Joel next, he asked me how it had gone.
“It was a productive two days, Joel. I didn't realize how stressed I was going into this,” I said. “But the work was really important and I feel like we are ready to take action to address our District’s challenges without becoming too mired down in worries about the consequences. I am happy with what we accomplished.”

Joel responded, “I’m always a little nervous when I’m setting expectations of a group; I’m glad it went well for you. Did you make some great plans for the year?”

“We did. The principals agreed we need to start out with an academic team and an academic focus. I’m excited because I feel like they’re starting to see the vision of what I see. As the two days went by, I felt the respect level growing for my knowledge and the way I do business. I took the time to ask the principals about previous initiatives and ongoing initiatives that they have,” I said.

“That was a smart idea, Teena,” Joel answered.

“I agree,” I said. “It went well. This was a very rich discussion time. The principals told me of a couple of initiatives that they had ongoing and we agreed to keep those because we’ve spent a lot of money to train people. I shared that I am willing to keep those initiatives going this year; however, we need to look at the data at the end of the year and see if they're making a difference in student achievement. Then by looking at the brutal facts we decide: Is this worth our time and effort the next year?”

“It is really a shame that dollars dictate much of our decisions,” Joel lamented. We talked about the looming State budget difficulties and what effects we might see in our districts. Joel gave his little pep talk to me: “Don’t worry about what you don’t have control over. Take care of what you do have control over. Now you just have to get the first few weeks of school under your belt and you’ll feel much better.”
“You are a great friend, Joel. I hope your year starts out well too,” I said.

Joel proceeded to tell me about a few issues he was dealing with and we discussed ways to approach the issues. After a few more minutes, I told him thanks again and said goodbye.

When I read back on my journal entry after that conversation, I noted that Joel had given me a lot of positive mentoring that day:

As we finish up the two-day workshop, and we write in our journals our reflections, my reflections all relate around I hope I can live up to the expectations the principals have of me. This is hard work—I want to do my best—I want to help these folks succeed and feel good about their roles. Sometimes it’s amazing to me because I don’t realize how much of a leader I really am. I talked with Joel about the workshop and I debriefed with him how it went. He says “Teena, How do you know all this stuff? How do you know how to be such a good leader? I am so impressed with what you're doing.”

It is nice to hear from someone else that they truly do view me as a strong leader and a person who can get things done. It is amazing to me that others sometimes have a higher opinion of what I can do than I do of myself. It is amazing to me that although I know I have skills, others might view me as more skillful than I view myself.

**A Storm Brewing**

The first week of school went smoothly. It was the second week when all hell broke loose.

The Sheriff’s department had three officers standing in the Student Commons area when I arrived at the high school. The tension was palpable, and I knew this could be a situation that could quickly escalate out of control. It was 10:15 AM on a Tuesday during the second week of school. I had received a call moments before from the high school saying that close to 200 students were engaged in a sit-in.

The first thing I did was to ask the assistant principal what was going on. He stated that he and the sheriff’s officers had asked the students to go back to class and they had refused.
They were in a virtual standoff. I took a deep breath and walked into the midst of the group. I looked at them and waited until the student voices lowered. I then asked them for their attention.

I started out sharing how there is a right and a wrong way to make voices heard. I explained that if I were to get a speeding ticket I would not be rude and belligerent to the officer—but if I felt I was wronged, I would address it in the proper way. All people want justice.

One boisterous young man shouted out something that was not appropriate. I pointed to him and stated I would talk to him later. I then quickly realized I needed to appeal to positive leaders in the group. I stated, “I can either let this young man be your spokesperson, or you can decide what student leaders you want to represent you by meeting with me.” The ASB president stood up, the AP calculus student stood up, the volleyball captain stood up, and a few others stood. When I had seven to eight students, a mix of ladies and gentlemen, I asked them to come with me to a small room off of the office to talk.

As I began the dialogue with the student representatives, we set ground rules so everyone in the room could be heard and the conversation would be respectful and productive. The students began sharing feelings of oppression, noting they felt that although they were good kids, they were being branded as an entire group as bad kids by the school, the community, and the administration. The students in the group further shared that because of a few “bad” kids, the campus got a police officer; cameras were installed in every nook and cranny; and the campus went from being entirely open campus to being completely closed, a change that was made without dialogue with students. Students also shared that they sometimes felt unsafe, both physically and academically, because staff didn’t pay attention to bullying and harassment that was occurring.
I shared with these students my message to our staff at the previous week’s orientation meeting, which was focused on every staff member’s responsibility to help ensure social, emotional, physical, and academic safety. I told them that their voices needed to be heard and that they needed to be part of the solution by letting staff know when issues arise.

The student representatives reported feeling the culture of the school had disintegrated and their voices were not being heard. The students continued to share frustrations and I asked them how they thought we could come to a consensus and end the standoff. I explained I was their advocate, telling them that our Constitution allows for peaceable assembly; however, at the same time, I knew they were breaking school rules by skipping their classes and there would be consequences. I assured them that I valued their passion for standing up about an issue and appreciated their respectful way of discussing it with me. I talked about how in our country, oppressed groups have used peaceable means to effect social justice, while at the same time taking consequences when any laws were broken. We had a short discussion about social justice leaders in our society and how they appropriately effected change.

I helped the students come up with a way to formulate a petition asking the administration and eventually the school board to hear their concerns and seek ways to address their concerns. The students asked me to speak to the entire group and explain our way of addressing the sit-in issue. I spoke to the entire group, viewing this as a perfect learning opportunity to help them understand the right way to effect change. The students signed the petitions and returned to class.

The work did not stop there. I went back to my office and immediately composed a letter to the teachers at the high school. I explained that this was a perfect opportunity to use this momentum to have deep and rich discussions with students regarding social justice and what
culture is and can become, especially in light of our culturally diverse student body. Shields (2004) asserted educators have to overcome silence about ethnicity and social class. They need to make space for these conversations at appropriate times. I was particularly pleased when I had one of our English teachers describe to me how she had told students about the time in graduate school when she and a group of other Black students were arrested because they questioned an officer about the way he treated a fellow graduate student. She shared with the students the deep feelings she had of not being heard and being discriminated against. She told them how university officials came down within a few hours and had all the students released. She told them that, even though she had faced consequences for her actions, she felt she had stood up for what was right. She further described to me the rich dialogue, questions, and sharing that resulted from her relating her experiences. Another teacher explained to me how he had used the opportunity to discuss democracy and what freedom of speech means, asking how we value that right and what our responsibilities as citizens are. I got goosebumps as I listened to story after story of how teachers had used this potentially volatile situation as a moment to develop mutual respect for many diverse perspectives. In this way our district is fortunate: We have a multicultural, diverse group of teachers who are not afraid to discuss “color-blindness” and stereotypes.

This also gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I could discuss the cultural competency of our schools with staff members. I planned to use Lindsey, Roberts, and Jones’ (2005) The Culturally Proficient School to spark conversations to determine how close we were to the tipping point of introspection–obviously, given some of the problems students described, there probably were teachers who ranged from culturally destructive to culturally incapacitated to culturally blind. With the teacher leaders who responded to me with the understanding of
cultural competence, I believed we could have our high school teachers and students reach cultural proficiency where they could honor differences, see diversity as a benefit, and be knowledgeable and respectful of other cultures. This would take some work. Foster (2006) stated that teachers are a product of their environment. Because we are environmentally raised, we may be unconscious about personal bias. Foster further offered five steps for staff members to reach cultural competency: 1. Assesses culture: Claim your differences. 2. Value diversity: Name the differences. 3. Manage the dynamics of difference: Frame the conflicts caused by differences. 4. Adapt to diversity: Change to make a difference. 5. And finally, institutionalize cultural knowledge: Teach about differences. Delpit (2006) further claimed that teacher professional development programs need to work on teaching diversity and respecting student rights.

As Petrovich and Wells (2005, p. 12) noted, “Achieving an excellent education for all requires policies and practices addressing both equity and equality.” I didn’t know where this sit-in would take us, but I did know that students felt they had a voice and were concerned about social justice. I knew that change has to be incremental—but there is caution in that we not let that understanding keep us from acting. I hoped to embody Foster’s (2006) admonitions:

There is a thing about being a leader—act courageously for your students—develop relationships and think clearly. Don’t be a leader unless you are prepared to act on the behalf of your students. Cultivate relationships with people. Stop and listen. You need to know your community and who can help you. You are also serving the community. Act on the behalf of students. Know your friends and keep your enemies close. Make it okay to get into skilled discussions.

As I worked to help students and staff understand the situation, I didn’t keep the board as well-informed as I should have. Hannah, a long-time school board member, said, “Teena, it almost seems like you want to come in on a white horse and be the hero. It’s tough when the
board looks like the bad guy in this situation. I know you didn’t mean for this to feel this way, but that’s how it feels to me.” That Friday, I wrote the following apology/explanation to board members in my weekly newsletter to them:

I am sorry I haven’t talked to you about what is happening with the Student privilege committee since the initial sit-in incident and sharing with you the requirements I asked students to prepare for us. When I initially sat down with students and the principal the day after the sit-in and talked to them about the issue—that is when I told the students that we make decisions based on data and they would have work to do to look at any options to opening campus. When they asked me if the data were to show favorable opinions to opening it, would I support a recommendation to the Board, I did tell them at that time there are a few non-negotiables that we had in my previous district that for me I would have to include in a recommendation to the Board. First, I would not even recommend doing a full open campus. I also said I would not recommend having students be able to take passengers in cars, that if students made mistakes they would individually lose the privilege, that parents would have to approve by permission slips for their child to have the privilege, and they would have to sign in and out. This was told to them early on with no guarantees that the principal or I would recommend to you as a Board to look at opening back up campus at all until we look at all of the research. I know that you as a Board, using administrative recommendations, had to make a tough decision in the past to close it, based on community and parent concerns. We should know, that with this new group of students, if the perceptions have changed and whether this should be an option for kids now. They know that the research they (and I) do will impact what recommendation will be brought forward. Hannah has been sitting in on the student privilege committee meetings with the students and parents, and can give you more of an update at the next meeting. Here is the memo I sent to the students of the Student Privilege Committee explaining the data to find in order to make any determinations for campus changes or guidelines: 1) A review of the 25 like-sized districts to determine their open/modified/closed campus stance. This will require determining a precise list of questions that are asked the same to each of the people talked to from the individual districts. This is also the time to ask for student handbooks to be sent and any
information pertaining to their decisions; 2) Have a survey process, best if it follows some type of randomized protocol, to survey at least 25% of the student body parents regarding their feelings toward open/modified/closed campus. This should follow some system to show random selection. Again this will require a precise list of questions to be asked each time the same way; 3) Complete a survey of all high school staff including teachers, para-educators, secretaries, custodians, and specialists. This should follow the same format. Survey Monkey or a like free survey instrument might be a good way to gather these data; 4) Complete a survey of all high school students. Again this should follow the same format of using the same questions; 5) Complete a survey of at least 50% of the downtown business owners (this will require a walk-around to the businesses) and 50% of the Chamber of Commerce members (I asked the students to let me know when they have their survey ready and I can take a student representative with me to the Chamber meeting for members to complete the survey). Again, same format of questioning; 6) Finally, I would recommend you get the discipline data, like one of the student representatives recommended, of before and after campus rules changed in the past.

Once you have received the raw data, you will want to develop graphs and charts that document your results. This will be a lot of work and will give us a complete picture of views of all stakeholders. Please show your rough draft of survey questions to your principal before you start the process. She will want to make sure you get all the questions asked the first time and not have to go back for some information.

I appreciate your willingness to step up to the plate as student leaders and gather these important data. I too will be conducting research as well. This will allow for an informed decision-making process.

I explained to the Board that we would see how motivated the students were to do the legwork, and would have a large amount of data before making any decisions. My intentions were not to put the Board in a bad light; on the contrary, I worked to talk to the students and let them know the Board had to make a decision before based on evidence that was given to them.
It really reminded me that I should have spent more time discussing with the Board why I was doing what I was on this contentious situation.

At a subsequent student privilege committee meeting the student group set three goals: 1. Provide data and statistics to help look at options for open campus; 2. Work as a student body to help change the perception of our student body by conducting community service, sharing with the paper our positive academic and social accomplishments, and honor our individual differences; and 3. Work to build back an inclusive culture where students feel safe, a part of the school, and members of a team with positive school spirit.

It took the students almost 3 months to prepare all of the data. They put together a PowerPoint and a tri-fold board to present first to the principal, then to me, and then to the school board. At the school board meeting, the students did an exceptional job of presenting information. They remembered that I asked them to give all data, not just data that fit their argument to open campus. They thanked the board for listening and gave an insightful, compelling argument for having a modified open campus. The Board was impressed. I worked to make sure students and members of the audience knew the Board made the decision they’d made in the past because they’d had to because of problems. The Board voted unanimously to open the campus, following the guidelines the student privileges committee recommended. Later, when I talked to Hannah, I think she understood I was not trying to malign the Board.

After working with this intelligent, motivated group of students, I had high hopes for our society–if this was a sample of how our students have a vision based on democratic ideals of justice and equity, I know our future is in good hands with this generation.

My journal entries expressed how I had thought back on how powerful this experience was for me and how I gained more insight on mindfully being aware of the full situation and how
that helped me identify, encourage, and embrace diverse voices to create richer representations within and about my district. I worked to bridge differences that we had through compassion rather than by using my power and shaming the students into conformity.

Joel was more than impressed when I called him a few days after the incident and explained what happened.

“How did you keep your cool?” Joel said. “I would have had the sheriff’s department move in and take prisoners.” Joel laughed. “Not really, but tempting if I had been in your shoes.”

“Do you remember the principal from Yakima in our superintendent's cohort?” I asked.

“Yes, why?” Joel questioned.

“Well, I remembered as I walked into the sea of kids how she told me once about having a similar experience, and her biggest takeaway was to remember to use principles of social justice. Her voice resonated in my mind as I faced the students. That didn’t mean that I wasn’t shaking in my boots,” I said.

“Well done, my friend,” Joel answered. “I’ll talk to you soon, when you have your next big activity.” We laughed as we hung up.

**Levy Preparations**

The next time I called Joel, it was with a question concerning sending our levy pamphlet to the PDC (Public Disclosure Commission).

“Joel, the folks at the Educational Services District think we don’t need to send it in to the PDC to get their approval,” I told him.

“I would suggest otherwise,” Joel said. “I always say better safe than sorry. You know the PDC will make sure you are factual only, and that way if they approve it ahead of time, you won’t have any questions later. How is your levy campaign going?”
“We are in the midst of it, Joel. I’m spending almost every evening at community meetings explaining why we need levy funds,” I said.

“That’s right. You guys have never had a levy there before, have you?” Joel questioned.

“Right. Wouldn’t you know it that I land in one of the six districts in the State out of 295 who haven’t had to levy tax dollars before. The federal forest dollars have always provided the revenue stream that comes from local levy dollars in other districts. With the federal dollars diminishing, we have to convince our voters that we need their help,” I said.

“Well, the legwork you’re doing now is critical,” Joel advised. “Make sure you get a clear, consistent message out throughout the whole campaign.”

“Let me tell you about a meeting I had yesterday,” I said. “You won’t believe this. I had three people come into my office and tell me that if I got this levy passed, I would cause them to lose their house and go on welfare.”

“Really?” Joel asked. “What did you say?”

“Well, I really tried to listen to them. Then I explained to them that if they moved to any other county in the State, they would be paying at least twice the amount of school tax that we are asking for. I told them that I respected their right to vote no, but tried to explain why the levy is important,” I said.

“Teena, you know there will always be that certain faction that will never vote for more taxes, no matter what it’s for,” Joel replied.

“I know. I laughed to myself when I walked them out to the parking lot, and the man sidestepped a bit when I commented on his beautiful new Winnebago mini-van. It was the same style my dad has been looking for,” I said.
“It’s all a matter of priorities, I say,” Joel responded. “Our country was built on the premise that we are all taxed to provide facilities and services for the common good. People are just frustrated with the amount of taxes they have now, especially with the bad economy.”

“I have met my share of those with different priorities here,” I said. “But I don’t think they are the majority.”

“I hope you have a good plan to counteract the vocal minority then,” Joel commented.

“The biggest help we have had so far is having the levy chair from my previous district drive 8 hours to get here and give an evening presentation to our new levy committee. He did an exemplary job and I can’t thank him enough for volunteering to help,” I said. When I looked back at my journal, that evening stood out as a highlight:

I can’t believe Jeff would travel all this way to help me start out my levy committee. He is a busy pharmacist who owns his own business, so every day he is not there during the week he has to have someone cover for him. I feel so lucky to have made such a good friend and supporter over the years I was in Chaparell. When I asked him if he would consider making the trip down here, he said “Yes if your husband takes me salmon fishing.” At first I thought he was joking, but he was serious.

Everyone I talked to here says “You will never pass a levy in this county; you won’t ever pass it on the first try; Good luck trying to get something people have never paid for before, especially in this economy.” Jeff is optimistic. He says, “Teena if we could pass it in one of the poorest counties in the State, you can put together the same type of campaign here. I bet you will pass at 54%.” (In our State it takes a 50% plus one to pass a maintenance and operations levy.) Jeff goes on to say that if I can keep people as focused and positive as I did in Chaparell, I can do it here.

The evening was wonderful! We came back to our house and debriefed. Jeff was very pleased to see close to 50 people at the meeting and he said that people were asking the right questions. We got three really influential community members to agree to co-chair
the committee. I am really excited and Jeff has re-enthused me that we can pass this the
first time around.

We didn’t talk long because he and Gary wanted to get up early to get out fishing. Jeff
headed off for the guestroom with last minute instructions for Gary to make sure he is up
by 4:00 so they can head out to fish early. I am glad it is Gary and not me.

“Teena, you have a good friend when he drove that far to help on this,” Joel said. When I
told him about the “bribe” to go salmon fishing, Joel said, “ Heck, if you would have said fishing,
I would have come down too!” We laughed.

“Joel, if I don’t seem as if I’m connecting much over the next few months, that’s because
I’m spending all of my time working to pass this levy,” I said.

“I understand,” Joel answered. “You know the thing I have never understood is how
school districts have to have levies to support basic education and yet the superintendents and
staff can only ‘campaign’ on their own time after work hours. It makes no sense.”

“I agree,” I replied. “I can do factual presentations during work hours but cannot give my
opinion. That is really frustrating. That is something every superintendent in the State who has a
levy has to deal with, however. Maybe you need to run for public office, Joel, and change ways
that schools are funded!” I kidded Joel. Joel was the county precinct committee officer and very
involved in politics. I kept telling him I would be his campaign manager.

“Teena, you know as well as I do that we are politicians already. We have to watch
everything the legislature is doing and lobby on behalf of what is best for our district and kids.
We have to advocate for what is best for education in our State all of the time,” Joel preached.
He has always tried to keep me very active in State politics; and early on when I became
superintendent and we were in the same legislative district, we would often travel to Olympia
together to lobby our legislators for education funding or reform. He shared a few current political issues to keep an eye on and then we said goodbye and hung up.

Second Storm Approaches

It was only 2 weeks later when I called Joel on his cell phone. “I want you to put a hit out on someone,” I jokingly said in a frustrated manner.

“Wow, that’s the first time anyone has asked me that in conversation,” Joel kidded back.

“I have to tell you about our newspaper editor. I am so angry I could throw something at him or send him Ex-Lax brownies,” I continued. “Can you tell I’m frustrated?”

Joel laughed. “Hang on. I have to drive a ways, so I will put you on speaker so you have plenty of time to talk.”

“You know we have been working really hard on the levy,” I said.

Joel replied, “Yes, go on.”

“In my previous two districts I have always had a good relationship with the press. I went down to talk to the editor with the notion that he would be supportive of schools and the levy just like other editors I have worked with,” I said.

“And he wasn’t?” Joel asked.

“Well, I thought he was as I was explaining all of the facts and giving him all of the information I had. I asked him if he could do an article explaining the need for the levy. I thought our conversation went well, and then just as I got up to walk out the door of his office, he said to me, ‘You know I will have to seek out and publish opposing views to this don’t you?’ I couldn’t believe it. And when the paper came out this week, the whole front page begged for a battle between levy supporters and non-supporters. He even encouraged people to give their opinions on the newspaper’s Facebook page!” I almost shouted into the phone receiver.
“Now Teena,” Joel started. “Remember what I said—clear, consistent message. Maybe this will incense more people than you and you will start hearing from the silent majority instead of the vocal minority.”

“It doesn’t feel like that right now,” I whined. “I’m sick and tired of having to fight to get the information out there to shortsighted people who don’t understand what happens when levies fail. Our levy committee has tried to run a positive campaign, but I’m about ready to start telling folks what the consequences will be if a levy doesn’t pass.”

“I’m thinking that you need to stop and take a deep breath and think strategy for a bit. Don’t be hasty,” Joel advised. “Haven’t you ever heard that adage, ‘Never argue with a man who buys ink by the barrel’? If you do feel you need to respond, find someone in the community who is well-respected and have her or him write a letter to the editor. Whoever you have write it doesn’t need to use space to respond specifically to fabrications, if that is what they are, in the original article. By the time the letter is printed, people will have forgotten about the details. Have the person just state that he or she is in opposition to the article previously printed followed by a couple of paragraphs in support of the levy. Try to get a parent who had children who did well in the school and have the parent share a short, positive experience.”

“Do you think it will work?” I asked.

“Well, think about it first and talk to your levy team, and don’t forget to ask your board. They may have an opinion as well,” he suggested.

I thanked Joel for listening. I was a little frustrated that he was trying to fix my problem and didn’t want to join me in blaming the editor for all of the problems.

“Let me know what you figure out,” Joel said before he hung up. “Oh, and don’t forget to cut out all of the articles. You’ll want to look at them sometime in the future!”
“Fat chance,” I said, as much to myself as to him, as I put down the phone.

And as if that wasn’t enough, the very next week the sheriff’s department arrested three of our high school students for smoking pot across the street from the high school, and they were called to the middle school to break up a nasty fight. That was on the front page the next week.
CHAPTER FOUR

GUEMES ISLAND:
A PERSONAL JOURNEY TO ANALYSIS

The Rocky Weekend

I barely made it to the train station on time. It was a Friday morning, and I had to leave for the station after I finished a meeting with the Cabinet, which was composed of a group of administrators and department heads. We were discussing the action plan for closing our middle school, and I felt it important I be at the meeting. My husband helped me with my suitcase. It was bulging and heavy with books, computer, and articles. I threw on my backpack, which contained additional reading material, and trotted to the train platform just as the northbound train pulled up.

Turning around to kiss Gary, I thanked him for taking the time to help me pull all of my things together and then, feeling the push of the queue behind me, I boarded the train. I stashed my luggage in a front compartment and made my way to my assigned seat. By the time I sat down, the train was in motion.

It took me a moment to settle in to my surroundings—luckily the train wasn’t full and I could spread out my things on the seat next to me. I took out the last few articles I wanted to read before meeting with Laurie again.

I chose the location where we would meet this time. For me, it entailed a train trip to Seattle, and then a bus ride to Everett to meet Laurie. From there we planned to head to a small island in the San Juans where the owner of the resort assured me we would have quiet and solitude to work. Earlier in the week I’d given Laurie my itinerary and she’d promised to pick me up in Everett.
About 5 hours later, after a switch from train to bus, I arrived. We didn’t plan an exact location to meet, so I pulled my heavy bags to the front of the station, expecting to see Laurie waiting for me. I waited about 5 minutes and then texted her to let her know my location. No answer. I continued to wait. About 15 minutes later I called and left her a message telling her to meet me at the corner of 33rd and Kline. No response. I knew she wouldn’t forget, so I wondered if something had happened to her.

The phone rang. Apologetically, Laurie explained she was tied up in a meeting and didn’t get to leave work early. She said she would be right there. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was looking forward to talking to her again.

Shortly after I hung up, a blue Honda Civic zipped around the corner and skidded to the curb. Laurie got out and opened the trunk.

“Oh, I can see you packed light like I did,” I joked. I put one of the larger suitcases in the back seat because the trunk was full.

“So sorry I’m late,” Laurie apologized once again. “I’m told that once people ride with me, they chose to drive themselves the next time.”

I pondered her comment, but only for a moment, because the car behind us beeped its horn as she cut in front of it. “We aren’t in any hurry, Laurie. We can’t check in until 3:00,” I coaxed.

“I know that,” she said, exasperated. “Now tell me where we are going. I like to know the general direction we’re heading.”

“We need to drive north on I-5 to Anacortes. From there we’ll be taking a short ferry ride to Guemes Island.” I was a little put off by her clipped comment. I knew I had shared the destination with her earlier.
“That helps. Sit back and enjoy the ride,” she decreed in a crisp tone.

For the remainder of the ride it was stilted conversation. I wanted to tell Laurie all about the things I had learned, but felt that she wanted introspective time without me blabbing all the way to the ferry. It was as if I was with a complete stranger once again.

The rest of the evening was much the same. After we drove off the ferry to the small island, Laurie asked, “Where exactly is this resort?”

I joked, “I think if we drive we’ll eventually find it.”

“I do not fricking want to drive around the whole island to find the damn cabin,” Laurie muttered.

“Sorry, bad joke. Just keep following this road. Eventually it leads right to the spot,” I replied. I thought to myself, *Can I do a whole weekend with this?* I was already reeling from the news that my husband had to go in to the urologist to determine if he had cancer, and my son was AWOL and no one had heard from him for 3 days after he was denied entrance to the Navy because a GED just wouldn’t do in place of a regular high school diploma. I reminded myself that this time was important and whether I got along with Laurie or not, I needed to get work done. I thought to myself, *Maybe she’s encountering life bumps just like I am right now.* I resolved to seek first to understand why she was reacting the way she was to me before jumping to conclusions.

When we arrived I was somewhat disappointed by our accommodations, and I wondered if Laurie felt the same way. The small cabin smelled of cat pee and wood smoke, and the furniture was ragged and worn. This time we had two separate bedrooms and we each peeled off, left and right respectively, to put down our belongings. The rest of the afternoon was stonily
silent–Laurie had a place staked out in front of the windows, looking out over the rocky beach to other islands. I sat on the back couch and read quietly.

**Mindfulness in Daily Practice**

The next morning, after we ate our separate breakfasts, Laurie went back to her spot at the window. I headed out for my morning walk. I found it easier for me to be mindful when I walked in the fresh air—it really helped me to settle down and start the day on a positive note.

I struggled to walk on the pebbled beach. My shoes sank into the round smooth rocks and I related my walk to the way the weekend had started—rocky. The first weekend was so smooth and the beach easy to walk, much like our conversations had flowed that previous time we were together. This time, just as the walk was harder on the rocky beach, so was feeling as if I couldn’t connect with Laurie and have the deep conversation about mindfulness I had so been looking forward to having.

As I rounded the beachhead, I saw a smoother, sandy beach. I sat down on a large piece of driftwood, grinding my feet into the sand until I felt rooted. I laid my upward-facing palms on my thighs and breathed in deeply. Gradually, as I breathed in calm and breathed out smiles, my shoulders relaxed, and then my spine, all the way to my toes. If a thought came into my mind, I gently placed it in my palm and continued breathing. I looked out towards the ocean and continued to breathe. I breathed in and felt my whole body rising and expanding on inhalation, and falling and contracting when I exhaled. This reminded me of Stahl and Goldstein’s (2011) directions on doing a body scan:

As you deepen your practice of the body scan, you may begin to be aware of more and more subtle feelings. It’s like when you go to the ocean and initially only hear the loud crashing of the waves; after some time you may distinguish smaller and more subtle
sounds that make up the overall crashing. So it is with the body scan. As you deepen your practice, you’ll begin to feel more and more sensations. (p. 69)

When I first started meditating, I would shut my eyes tightly and wait for a spot of light to be in the upper part of my brain. This time I meditated with my eyes open and felt the light inside of me. I started the body scan at the top of my head and worked down to my toes, feeling sensations as I mentally moved down my body. I was frequently amazed when I finished meditating and looked at my watch—on this day it was 25 minutes later and it had felt like a small moment in time.

I headed back to the cabin, renewed and with a resolve to treat Laurie with loving kindness and not push for conversation. As I retraced my steps, it seemed a much easier journey.

The Anticipated Discussion

Back at the cabin, I found Laurie with car keys in hand. “I have to make a phone call at 10. If you want to talk after that I’ll pull out my notes and we can discuss mindfulness,” she said as she sidled past me out the door.

“Sounds good,” I replied as I watched her shut the door. I pulled out the butcher paper with my mapping of mindfulness concepts, authors, and articles and wrote notes under the categories about the articles I had read while on the train the day before. After I was done getting all of my articles out, my mapping done, and my thoughts pulled together, Laurie came in the front door.

She looked as if she had been crying. I didn’t ask anything, but looked down and shuffled through my papers. She grabbed her bag and pulled out her literature review. “Okay, I’m ready if you are,” she said.
I had been looking forward to this discussion for more than a month. I had been getting increasingly nervous as I’d waited for her to come back. I began in a flurry—speaking quickly so she had little chance to interrupt: “Really I am looking at this to see if we could break it into categories. Do you mind if I share it with you, what I’m thinking?” I asked.

“Knock yourself out. I’m all about that,” Laurie replied off-handedly.

I continued with my same zeal to illustrate what I was hoping to talk about. I persisted, saying, “Okay, I was thinking we could define mindfulness and meditation and compare Western views versus Eastern views because you’re looking at it more from an Eastern stance and I feel like I can seem successful in my own mind if I come at if from a Western perspective, because they almost seem to be at different levels in my mind,” I explained. “Then I thought if you don’t mind we can talk about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation and compare what we’ve noticed. It sounds as if you’ve been meditating a lot longer than I have, so maybe you can share with me some things that have been imbedded in your thought processes. You know, I feel like this is Karate Kid and I’m the kid learning.”

I gave an embarrassed laugh before continuing to plow forward. “Then I was hoping we could discuss methods of being mindful from the Western and Eastern points of view as far as just methods— you know, what are some processes that you’ve learned or that you’ve gotten into your mind to help you be mindful, because I have some things I do, and I thought maybe we could share those? And then maybe just a short discussion of our journeys to achieve mindfulness… I know, because you said you were working on something else and our chair, Dr. Gates, talked to you about heading in a different direction, and then maybe we could talk about the research itself and whether we’re finding any further calls to research and how that’s going to affect what we’re doing. Does that sound like that will work?” I asked.
“Sure,” Laurie replied crisply.


“I don’t know if I can add to any of what you said,” Laurie commented.

**How We Each View Mindfulness**

I quickly replied, “Oh, I think you can. So you know, I have a whole list of definitions of mindfulness (Anglin, Pirson, & Langer, 2008; Block-Lerner et al., 2007; Brody & Coutter, 2002; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Carson, Shih, & Langer, 2001; Christopher & Gilbert, 2010; Cohen & Miller, 2009; Dhiman, 2009; Gates, 2005; Khistey, 2009; Langer & Moldueana, 2000; Leventhal & Rerup, 2006; Shaver, Lavy, Saron, & Mikulincer, 2007; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006; Valorinta, 2009). When you first started researching mindfulness, did you find many different thoughts on the meaning or definition of mindfulness?” I questioned.

“Yes. I have come to a definition of mindfulness through a different path. I was in my twenties when I started reading Buddhist authors, and then in my thirties I began reading a wide variety of authors that come out of the Christian mystic tradition. And then I got into the Hindu traditions. So I feel as if for me, mindfulness … it’s … I can read the words about how it is defined, but to me it is also a felt experience. I read all of the things around the definitions of it and they all make sense and they are all exactly right, but they are all, for me, umm…. Flat. To me the experience of it is what is important. Sort of like the map is not the terrain, the map is a representation of something but it is not the something, and words are a representation of things, but they are not the thing.”

I nodded and said, “Uh huh.” I thought I understood what she was trying to put into words.
She continued, “And so yes, there are lots of different definitions and I think what’s happening is people are trying to take this experience that has been felt and experienced and then try to put words to it.”

I thought a moment about what she’d said. “Yes,” I concurred, “According to a lot of the research I have been reading, the Buddhist thought about mindfulness and meditation has been around for thousands of years and it is more of an ingrained pattern of life perhaps, and the Western thought is newer.”

I thought about my first experience with mindfulness and the authors I’d read to get my idea of what mindfulness is and how it is used. I mentioned to Laurie, “Langer (1992) does a lot with how she defines mindfulness in a Western setting. She gives a threefold definition of mindfulness, entailing the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective. I almost think they are two concepts that are melded together, but perhaps mindfulness in the moment is, from the Western perspective, more doing rather than the feeling—does that make sense?” I asked. Before she could answer, I interjected, “Langer (2005) describes mindfulness as an effortless, simple process that consists of “drawing novel distinctions,” that is, noticing new things.”

“So I don’t know, so I am going to respond and you can say Yeah but…” Laurie replied.

“Okay.” I smiled, and my laugh was less nervous and more inviting.

“For me the definitions are the same, but the meaning is different because the culture is different, and I see them as sort of a Venn diagram so there is that middle piece that overlaps,” Laurie proposed.

“Yes,” I agreed. This was how I was beginning to make sense of the two trains of thought as well.
Laurie continued, this time with more enthusiasm. “I see a person getting to them from different paths because really in Buddhism and in the traditions of the East, it is about being awake. When Buddha got up from underneath the bodhi tree and came out people would say ‘Are you a God?’ and he would say ‘No’, and they would say ‘Are you this?’ and he would say ‘No’ and finally they asked ‘What are you?’ and he replied ‘I am awake.’ And that is all he ever professed to be, is awake to being present in the moment. For me, when Langer (2000) talks about novelty and seeing things in new ways, it’s really the same thing, just expressed differently; because I think what Langer is getting at is that our natural state is to be ‘not awake,’ so novelty and looking at novelty is how you are when you are awake.”

She continued, “I think what Buddhism says is that our natural state is really to be awake. And I think Langer (2000) would want us to be there, where being awake is our natural state; I think she is just aware that we have email and cell phones and beeping things that pull us back into…”

“Right, exactly,” I acknowledged. “And I just want to share how I’ve thought about mindfulness because I have been reading most of the Western thought. You know Langer (2000) defines mindful learning as a state of consciousness, awareness in which the individual is actively noticing new things and thus becomes implicitly aware of the context and conditional nature of information. What’s interesting is that she has been studying this for a long time, and it seems to me from my reading that the initial definition she gave of mindfulness in her 1981 article with Chanowitz has changed subtly. Have you noticed that?”

“I haven’t read as much of her stuff,” Laurie replied. “I just ordered her 1997 book Mindful Learning and I haven’t started it yet.”

“I just finished another book of Langer’s. In her 1989 book, Mindfulness, Langer stated:
Even with the best definitions, the finest research designs, and the most careful answers to each question, mindfulness cannot be captured, cannot be analyzed once and for all. The experiments my colleagues and I have done, and the anecdotes from ordinary life in this book, only hint at the enormous potential of the mindful state. In trying to quantify it, or reduce it to a formula, we risk losing sight of the whole. (pp. 202-203)

We were both quiet for a few minutes. I then took up a new subject. “I want to ask you about the concept of bare attention (Gates, 2005). Dr. Gates talks about that, and Jon Kabat Zinn talks about it.”

“Talks about what?” Laurie asked, with a puzzled look on her face.

I picked up the article and began to read. “Gates (2005) wrote that bare attention is the Buddhist teaching of approaching the understanding of existence through experience. Awareness and mindfulness are other terms used to convey this concept. In providing a definition of attention it is not the same as thought, it lies beyond thinking. Attention is more like a vessel which can hold and contain our thinking, helping us to see and know our thoughts as thoughts. Attention is an awakened state of being and is discussed in Buddhism as being developed through the practice of meditation. (p. 155)

I thought back to how Gates (2005) talked about how goals are a hindrance and how meditation in all of its forms is simply the effort or practice of bringing the mind to attend to whatever is present. Laurie and I discussed the presence of the similarities of and the differences between Western and Eastern thought.

**The Struggles With Mindfulness**

Laurie looked at me after our last bit of discussion. “That is what I have been trying to explain. This is where the Venn diagram crosses over each other with mindfulness definitions.”
“Right. I think your focus, where Langer (2000) said mindfulness is a state where individuals continually make novel distinctions about objects of their attention—I think that’s her more current definition… umm….” I paused.

“Yes, it’s beginner’s mind,” Laurie said.

I didn’t realize what she meant when I continued the discussion. I thought she was telling me I was a beginner. “Exactly,” I agreed. “And that’s why I almost feel as if you and I are in such different places; I feel like I’m in a beginner’s mind. I feel like what I’m trying to do is really be attentive in the moment, and trying to… I was really very discouraged not long ago, and I found it interesting because I’m reading Mindfulness in Plain English by Gunaratana (2011), and he talks about discouragement, and do you mind if I read it to you—it is kind of what I have been feeling.”

“No, go ahead—I’m interested too.”

“He wrote:

The upshot of pushing too hard is frustration. You are in a state of tension. You get nowhere. You realize that you are not making the progress you expected so you get discouraged. You feel like a failure. It’s all a very natural cycle, but a totally avoidable one. Striving after unrealistic expectations is the source, nevertheless it is a common enough syndrome, and it spite of all the best advice you might find it happening to you. There is a solution. If you find yourself self-discouraged just observe your state of mind clearly, don’t add anything to it—just watch it. A sense of failure is only another ephemeral emotional reaction. If you get involved, it feeds on your energy and grows. If you simply stand aside and watch it, it passes away. If you are discouraged over your perceived failure at meditation that is especially easy to deal with. You feel you have failed in your practice. You have failed to be mindful. Simply become mindful of that sense of failure. You have just reestablished mindfulness with that single step. The reason for your sense of failure is just a memory. There is no such thing as failure in meditation. There are setbacks and difficulties but there is no failure unless you give up
entirely. Even if you have spent twenty solid years getting nowhere, you can be mindful at any second you choose. It is your decision. Regretting is only one more way of being unmindful. The instant you realize you have been unmindful that realization itself is an act of mindfulness. So continue the process, don’t get sidetracked by emotional reaction. (pp. 104-105)

“Uh huh, yes,” Laurie murmured and smiled.

I continued, still believing I was describing myself as a beginner. “I thought that was very interesting because I find I spend a lot of time beating myself up because I am not very meditative or because I am not very mindful, and as I read the Buddhist connotations of mindfulness and going through different stages to get that perennial wisdom, I feel like I am just barely skimming the surface,” I said, my voice cracking a bit.

Laurie looked over at me and smiled. She paused for a moment and then patiently said, “I think that what Gunaratana is really trying to get at is that there is no ‘place’ to go. The idea is just to sort of sit with wherever you are and acknowledge that state of being. The purpose is to give it a place to be. So much of what we do, I think, is trying to outrun–you know we feel discouraged, so we go do something, right, so we don’t feel the discouragement. If you just sit with the discouragement–it will leave you. You won’t have to run from it; it will run from you. But I think the goal of mindfulness is to be at a beginner’s mind, and you need to be back to beginner’s mind because that is the whole point–to look at everything as if it is for the first time. And to me, a lot of what mindful learning is about is not letting our past assumptions carry us forward so we don’t actually see what we are looking at,” Laurie explained.

I felt myself becoming emotional and tears started welling to the surface. Laurie had pinpointed how I had been feeling.
She continued, “So much of when you read stuff you have to know what we believe is just not true. Our thoughts deceive our reality. And even if we know it is not true, we act as if it is true, because there is this new knowledge that comes to us; but we just dismiss it, because sort of what group mind thinks is this and what we all believe is this. I know that we did a presentation with on-time graduation work and the ten myths of student achievement and what we do about them. So what we did was look at what are those common beliefs around what people think about students, you know. And one of them is ‘Kids who fail don’t come to school.’ And so we looked at the data, and what we showed was, yeah, some kids who don’t come to school fail, but we have kids with 31 absences who were getting an A and we had kids with no absences getting an F. So what we were trying to get people to look at is that attendance is not really the issue that is causing students to fail. And so we show people that and we talk about that and two meetings later we were having discussions on how to get those students to attend because if they don’t attend they are going to fail. And I said, “Did you not just come to two meetings–were you not here?” “Oh yeah,” they say. So for me that is a perfect example of mindlessness because what you are doing is, you are letting what you have always known or always believed, or what is prevalent in the culture, cause you to dismiss what you see with your own eyes or hear with your own ears. It is a waste.”

“I agree,” I said. “I guess what is tripping me up is that as I read it seems like such a foreign language to me. I know for you it probably doesn’t, because you have studied this for a while; but just that feeling of when Buddhist scholars (Baron & Misovich, 1999; Dhiman, 2009; Langer, 1992; Langer, Pirson, & Delizonna, 2010; Leventhal & Rerup, 2006; Shaver et al., 2007; Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006; Zajonc, 2006) talk about the sense of enlightenment, getting to Nirvana or jhana, and moving from stage to stage–I have no grounding
in that. So I feel like, *Okay, here I am–I’m just trying to be mindful every day and pay attention as I drive to work and not work on autopilot,* and I feel like, *Am I missing something?* Is there something deeper that I just don’t understand about Eastern thought and meditation?” I asked, as much to myself as to Laurie.

“I don’t know what you understand or know, so I don’t know if I can answer that question,” Laurie replied.

“I don’t know much,” I laughed and cried at the same time. I couldn’t understand why I was being so emotional discussing this.

“What I can say is that if people talk about ‘getting to’ enlightenment, again there is no place to get. I think what Buddha woke up to was that there is no place to get to. What Christian mystics say is, heaven is here and now. So they teach that heaven is not a place you go to when you die; heaven is a place that you create, or that you experience in the moment. I think enlightenment is the same thing. I don’t think it is a place that you go and stay. Maybe some people can stay there–God bless them.” Laurie grinned.

I grinned too. She continued, “But it is a place you can touch on and you might seek to remain in, but you remain in it by being mindful of what is, and so as you are being mindful you are in that place of enlightenment.”

“Do you feel like you have been there?” I questioned.

“Again, I don’t know the answer,” she said.

**You Are Already There**

I interrupted. “Yes, it is not a place. That’s the thing that is so hard for me, Laurie; I have been goal driven my entire life, and you know everything you talk about is that this is not a goal to get to…” This discussion was getting into deeper emotional territory.
“Because you are already there. One of my favorite Buddhist sayings is, ‘You are enough, you have enough, you do enough, relax.’ Goals are important, and you don’t want to just hang out at the beach all day (although I do); but I think you can be mindful of the goals, and on the way to the goal—because of the tradition I come out of—you know you have an intention to do something—and that’s great. I think mindfulness is about the how. It is not about the what. And it is not about the where; it is about the how. So how are you getting to your goal?” she questioned.

I paused and thought about her question. Then I continued, “I think you are exactly right. One of the things I guess I wondered if I am able to—if I have ever been able to do—is change my state of mind, because it feels like nature versus nurture. Am I going to do things exactly as my parents did? You know, I grew up in a work-oriented society, and I feel I was valued according to the work I did. You know, it’s interesting, because Davidson (2011) and Diamond (2011) talk about the brain research that shows that by meditating you can change the state of your brain, so I feel like there is hope—I can look at things in a different manner and make changes.”

“Well, so let me ask you a question.” Laurie paused for what seemed like an hour. “What is it you want?” she asked quietly.

My Epiphany

... Sudden Realization: A sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence. Tears began to roll down my cheeks. “That’s a good question,” I said. “You know, it’s interesting because…” Again tears welled up and I found it difficult to speak. Laurie was silent as I attempted to stop crying. Sobbing, I said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m chasing the golden ball that is out there, you know?”

Laurie said quietly, “And what is in the ball?”
“You know, that is what I so often wonder. Because one of the things I was reading says if you want to really be, like you said, in a heavenly place, or in the place where you finally realize the golden ball is not way out there, it is where you are now, and I think sometimes when… I worry about–when you are really mindful…” I stopped for a minute and wiped my nose and dried the tears off of my cheeks. “Chodon (2011) said it is easier–that the highs are not real high, and the lows are not real low, but that you are able to just get through it–but I think sometimes….”

Again I had to stop and regain my ability to talk, wiping my eyes and looking away from Laurie. “Sometimes I feel I have been moving so quickly so my mind won’t slow down enough …to feel…I’m sorry…” I said to Laurie as I sobbed again and couldn’t talk.

“No, that is why we are doing this,” Laurie responded kindly. “It is totally fine.”

“To feel,” I continued, “what is there–you know–I don’t want to say pitfalls in doing this work but it is really…” Again I had to stop for a minute and collect myself. “Sorry!” I blubbered to Laurie through my tears.

“No, it’s okay,” Laurie said. Just then someone knocked on the door.

“Hi,” said the owner of the cabins. “I’m checking to see if Teena remembered her massage today? She’s supposed to meet Diane at 11:30.”

Laurie saw me shaking my head behind the door and she could tell that I didn’t want to quit the discussion right then. “We are really in the midst of our research right now,” Laurie said. “Can she go after someone else?”

“Actually, that will work well,” Diane responded. “I have a guest who would like to have her massage earlier if possible. How about if Teena comes over about 1:00?”
I gave Laurie the thumbs up. “That will work great,” Laurie replied. Laurie shut the door and sat down across from me again at the kitchen table.

“Anyway,” I said. The momentum and built up emotion seem to have drained from the room, and I was not sure where to start back with the conversation.

**The Sudden Realization Sinks In**

I paused and thought back on our discussion right before the interruption. “I realize there are struggles with this work,” I began.

“Yeah,” Laurie said, “there are tremendous pitfalls to doing the work. Because what you get to do when you are doing it is look at all of the parts of yourself and all of the parts of your life and those things that you have been doing, whatever it is you do to avoid. Being mindful is the opportunity to sit with them; and grief in particular is something that we run from.” Laurie remembered my mentioning that my favorite uncle had passed away the week before and that I had not been able to go to his funeral. “The funny part about that is that you can’t actually run from it. You carry it with you.”

I nodded and agreed, “Uh huh.”

“But after a while it gets pretty damned heavy, so eventually you end up enrolling in a doctoral program….”

I laughed. She continued, “And do your dissertation on mindfulness so you can learn how to deal with all of it … I believe that your system knows what to do and your system takes care of itself. Your system will put you in situations where you need to do what you need to do, and, to use the words I heard the lovely talented Mike Bogart say when I went to this great mystical Bible class he taught called “The Bible in 15 Words” at the Center for Spiritual Living
in Seattle in about 1998: ‘First you get the prophets and if you don’t get the prophets you get the Babylonians.’ Right…?’”

“You may have to explain that to me,” I said. I didn’t understand what she was trying to tell me.

“It is evidently a biblical reference. It is first that notion that you get the things that come into your life that say, ‘Go this way. Do this…’ Or ‘Look at this…’ right, and if you listen to that and are receptive to that and open to that and do that, it is hard work. But if you don’t do that, your system will get louder. And louder, and louder, and louder, and pretty soon you’ll find yourself flat on your back, physically ill, because you are not listening.”

“Interesting,” I murmured.

“So you get the prophets who whisper in your ear very gently, saying ‘Deal with this’; if you don’t, you get the Babylonians who come in and chop off heads and put them on sticks.”

“That makes total sense,” I replied. “You know in my conversations with superintendents, women superintendents, it is so interesting. They don’t put it so eloquently, but what they say is, ‘I feel like I have been working my ass off. I have to work harder than a man because I have to prove something.’ What is interesting is that they come to that same conclusion, that is…is this job worth my health, my family, and my life? I am approaching mindfulness as a way to reduce stress. As I become more mindful I do really feel as if it’s helping; but it really dredges up feelings I was shocked to learn I have. Does that make any sense?”

“Like what feelings?” Laurie probed.

“Like just slowing down enough to wonder why I’m doing this work, why I didn’t notice thirty-some years ago when I first started that there’s more to life than work. You know, I think about what Chodon (2011) encourages us to do–be mindful every day…” I began to sob again.
“How many years I have wasted by not being present in the moment? How many things did I let pass by me in life, where I could have been more there? Does that make any sense?” Once again I was sobbing as I was talking.

“Yeh,” she whispered, and I cried some more.

**The Light Bulb Goes On**

“God,” I cried out. “I remember now that Chodon (2011) asserted that you can’t make changes in your life until you see yourself as who you are now. She also said it is a process and you can’t force it. It becomes a catch-22 when you try to force mindfulness and thus stress about not being able to meditate. I now clearly see what she meant.”

Laurie nodded. “I have to tell you I actually, in tears, had this exact same conversation 3 or 4 years ago with a very dear teacher and colleague who then looked at me and said, ‘You are exactly in the right place!’”

I laughed and wondered to myself if I was exactly in the right place.

“And to which I said ‘Fuck you,’ ‘cause he is just that kind of guy,” Laurie said.

We both laughed and I inhaled deeply.

“Have you ever seen the play *Our Town*? “ Laurie asked.

“Oh, long, long ago,” I replied. “I probably don’t remember it because I wasn’t mindful or in the moment,” I mused.

“You need to read it,” Laurie said. “This young girl goes through her life, dies, and when she dies and goes to–wherever you go when you die–she’s met by someone who says, ‘You can go back for a day if you want.’ And she says, ‘Oh my God, I want to, I want to, I want to.’ And one of the other people there says, ‘Be very careful,’ and she says, ‘Why? It would be so great to go back and see everybody.’ Another person there says, ‘Okay, if you really want to do this, pick
a day that is not important,’ and she says she wants to go back to her wedding day, and he again
says, ‘Pick a day that is not important…pick a day that is not important.’ So she says, ‘I will
pick my 11th birthday,’ and she goes back, and she stands and watches her 11th birthday. And
nobody is looking at anybody, and everybody is talking past each other, and nobody is taking any
time to be, and she breaks. And it is a beautiful, beautiful thing, and after I had this conversation
with Mike, dear teacher of mine, I felt like that girl in the play for 3 years.”

“Wow…” was all I could say.

Laurie continued, “I felt like I was standing there and I would sit in meetings and I would sit in an action team and I would just sit and just be silent and just watch, and I would look around and I would think, Nobody has any awareness of it…we are just not there…and that is what led to the despair, and if I still didn’t believe that working with children to ensure that they have a good and safe and wonderful place to learn and grow is the most important thing, other than raising children on your own, which I am obviously not doing… however, again it is the how we do that and the price that we pay in doing that.” Laurie stopped suddenly and just sat there. She seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

I cleared my throat. “And I guess also I would put in there that I have the right to not have to work to have meaning—I don’t even know how that fits in there. Umm, I don’t know. I guess part of it too is the whole piece of impermanence that I am learning about through this process of becoming more mindful and studying mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) wrote that our problem is ‘wanting things to stay the same, when inevitably they will change. The law of impermanence—things are never constant. Ultimately things change.’ And I guess, you know, it is like looking in the mirror and realizing that I am getting older…” I was close to tears again.
“Have I really taken the time to mindfully be there for…I am over 50 years old. Why did it take this long,” I sobbed, “to get here, to understand this?”

“Here, keep this Kleenex. I’ve had these exact same feelings,” Laurie said. Once again, in a kind quiet voice, she asked, “What is it that you want?”

“Well, that is such a good question.” I paused. “You know it is interesting, because I thought when I moved from one job–from a smaller district to a bigger district–where I thought there would be more people to help–that the stress of the job would be less because I would have less to do, fewer hats to wear, and perhaps the stress would be less. What I am finding is the women superintendents I have been interviewing have had the same feelings, because these are experienced superintendents who have gone from one district to another. I just wanted to talk about how they were socializing to their new surroundings and dealing with stress. They know the job, and the thing that I found more than anything is that it doesn’t matter what size district you have. It doesn’t matter what the circumstances are. The job is the job is the job—which is a hard job, a stressful job, and everyone I talked to reiterated, ‘Gosh, if you could figure out a way to make it easier to overcome the problems of stress I want to read your book–I want to know the answer.’”

**Answering My Question: How Do I Correlate My Expectations With Reality?**

I continued, “You know, the thing that is so interesting to me is that it kind of comes back to your question–what do you want? You know I am trying to use mindfulness to get to a point to where–I love my work, I want to keep doing my work. My worry goes back to when you talked about the Babylonians and the prophets. I am afraid that without figuring out ways to reduce stress, I am going to get something cut off. And I still want to do the work. I expected … I don’t know what I expected…but I’m finding that through this mindfulness process, it is not
easy. I thought that it would fix everything. It doesn’t fix things, but it makes you more aware of your daily walk.” I was quiet for a moment and continued. “You know, I now enjoy my days more.”

Laurie cut me off. “Have you ever fixed anything? Like in the outer world?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I questioned.

“Have you ever fixed a radio, or a broken car, or…?” she asked.

“Oh yeah, yeah,” I replied, wondering where she was going with this line of thought.

“Does it get worse before it gets better?” she prompted.

“Oh, a lot of times,” I replied. “Hmmm…” I was silent for a moment. Then I laughed, a deep belly laugh. “There you go,” I said.

“Well, because,” Laurie went on, “my experience of mindfulness and my experience with stress is that neither one comes from out there. “

I thought I could start to understand what she was trying to tell me. “That’s right. It’s inside,” I pondered.

“So there are times when something can happen and I am completely stressed. And that exact same thing can happen and I breeze by it when I am not. So for me it is not making an external change–that will not address the issue. It’s about an internal change, so for me it has always been about changing the place from which I act. Or changing the place from which I decide, or the place from which I look at something. So for me, what mindfulness does is help me get to that place. I think I have said this before–it’s that movie seat. Stay in that movie seat and the movie is going on–you don’t get up and run to the screen. So if you can do that in life too, those difficult things can happen, but you don’t go out to join them, and I think stress arises when you go out to join them. Somebody says you are not doing a good enough job, and you go
out and pick that up and think, ‘Oh thank you. I will take that with me.’ As opposed to thinking, ‘Thank you for your opinion. I leave it with you.’ Right?”

I nodded. I was still trying to think about what she had just said when she looked right at me and asked, “Who is the thinker of your thoughts? Because you can have conflicting thoughts, right?”

“Yes,” I said as I again pondered her words.

She continued, “So what is it you are thinking in your thoughts? And where is it that you are thinking those thoughts? And if you can get to that place where you can hold those issues…”

Laurie was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Is she coming back?” I asked and got up to answer the door. I couldn’t believe we had been talking for more than an hour. The emotion was thick in the air, and my mind was whirling with all of the issues we had been discussing. This was a good time to take a break.

I’d planned a massage when I’d first booked the cabin. The owner told me about someone who came out to the island and had a small building that she set up for massages. As part of being mindful, I had been paying attention more to my body and working to stretch my muscles, exercise, and get regular massages to help ease the tenseness. The massage took about an hour and I returned to the cabin, renewed and relaxed, ready to continue our intense conversation.

I sat back down at the table, and Laurie pulled up her chair facing me. “That was good, to take a break for an hour. So where did we leave off?” I asked. “You know, I like that monkey analogy that Dr. Gates talked about,” I continued. “Do you remember that?”
Laurie interrupted, “Yup—that’s how they catch them. Monkey hunters place pieces of food in the trap and the monkey puts its hand in, grabs a fist full of food, and then won’t open his fist and can’t get out of the trap.”

I continued, wanting to explain how the analogy related to me. “Yes, and that is sort of where I think my mind has been. My mind is like the monkey engaging in and holding on to those evaluative, analytical, judgmental thoughts, and that’s what I’ve been doing. Gates (2005) observed, ‘Humans go about constructing constructs that arbitrarily define and divide, which can deaden perception. The practice of paying attention reveals light and darkness as other constructs’ (p. 157), and I know he’s talking about it in a slightly different way. I guess when I consider light and darkness, it’s like going through this mindfulness approach—it awakens things I have tried to keep in their own little cages, their own little black box, as Kabat-Zinn would say. There is light in darkness.”

Laurie commented, “And as Thich Nhat Hahn (1991) would say, when those things come up say hello, welcome them, because what we resist persists.”

“Maybe it’s somewhat like where I read about a fire and if you place new pieces on top of the old, the new burns and the old is still there; but if you just let the old burn, it will get rid of it. Maybe that’s what I’ve been trying to do my whole life: put that new piece of wood on top, and it never really allowed the pieces to…” I was trying to understand why I had the feelings I did.

Laurie interrupted again, “And you are not the only one. Believe me.”

“Well it feels like it sometimes,” I replied.

“Everybody doing this work has that experience at some time,” Laurie offered.

“That’s good to know,” I remarked and continued. “So you know Dr. Gates (2005) wrote about compassion. And he stated, ‘Mindfulness diminishes that suffering which is added given
worries about where and when (p. 159),’ about things. That has not been my experience yet. I feel like as I open up cans that I haven’t opened before, I do suffer. Does that make any sense?”

“Uh huh,” Laurie said, nodding her head. “Does he define suffering?”

**Effects of Mindfulness on Me as a Woman Superintendent**

“He talks about it… He says the development of attention does not in and of itself result in a reduction of life’s hardship or difficulties (p. 159). And I guess that is the thing–when you asked me what is it that I want. My hope was that it would reduce, through the study, would reduce hardships or difficulties, but it really doesn’t. But I guess what it does do is to allow you to wade through them and be aware. Even though it is painful, and I am hoping there is light at the end of the tunnel.”

“It’s what I’m looking for myself,” Laurie admitted. ‘There’s a guy who just wrote the book *The Matterhorn*, and I don’t remember who he is, and he’s a Vietnam vet, and a very interesting man–I’ve heard him talk a couple of times. One of the things he talked about is that pain and suffering are different, yet they are used interchangeably. And he says that suffering accompanies pain when there is no meaning. He says childbirth is painful, but people generally don’t suffer because they have this baby at the end, right?’”

I agreed, nodding.

“I don’t know that I quite buy it, but Buddhists say pain is required, suffering is optional,” Laurie noted.

I conceded thoughtfully, smiling and nodding my head.

“There are words–and I would have to look it up–but suffering comes from attachment to a specific thing or outcome. Or wanting something to be the way it is not. And so they say the way to stop suffering is to become unattached to that thing that cannot be,” Laurie explained.
This was an interesting thought. I responded, “And I think that is the whole thing about understanding the impermanence, you know. It would be nice to be able to stay young, be healthy, have my family healthy, have time...” I grieved.

“Thich Nhat Hahn wrote a book in 2003 called No Death, No Fear,” Laurie told me. “It is such a good book. I actually used an excerpt at our graduation, when I used to do graduations. I put it in a speech—because what he says is two things: He says a flower is not a flower. A flower is made up of entirely non-flower elements. A flower is made up of sun, and wind, and rain, and soil, and nutrients, right? All of these things make this flower, and then what he says is, if any of any one of those things changed, the flower would be different. Or if any one of those things changed enough, the flower would cease to exist. So his whole thing is that when conditions are right, things manifest. When conditions change, they un-manifest. And so it is a cycle. When things are right, things are here; and when things change, they aren’t. So that is his version of impermanence. But they also talk a lot about that mindfulness, the getting to be the thinker of your thoughts, and how the thinker of your thoughts is that about you that does not change,” Laurie continued.

“Explain a bit. I’m lost,” I confessed.

“There is this part of you that is impermanent. There is a part of you that is beyond change, and again, Christians call it a soul, whatever, but there is that notion that there is that part of you which does not change. And so everything else changes, but they say there is a part of you that is beyond all of that. Now that might not be Buddhist, that might be Hindu,” Laurie grinned. “I’m very confused by all of it because I read it so it all merges at some point in my head.”
“Right,” I answered. “Well, you know, I have just read so many different articles. There is this one by Christopher and Gilbert (2010) where they say that mindfulness—they say that if people self-report, they have measures of mindfulness that indicate there is a positive relationship between mindfulness and wellbeing, and an inverse relationship between mindfulness and the depression symptoms. I’ve just been questioning myself as I move forward. Generally I am not depressed. I feel it is not necessarily being depressed; I feel like it is being sad. It is more trying to—I guess I’m recognizing having been on autopilot for so long and finally taking myself off autopilot and recognizing what I’ve missed. I guess, although it is tough, and there are days that I wonder why I’m doing this. At least I notice the days now,” I finished, smiling.

Laurie explained, “The problem is I feel as if I did go through the depression, and it was a good 3 years, and it started to end when I came back to the mindfulness practice. But right now where I am is, I don’t know how—I can’t live my life in that super goal-oriented place anymore. I feel as if I have stepped off of that treadmill and sat beside it and cried for about 3 years, and now though, where I am is, can I even still work in that world anymore? For example, every time my superintendent sees me he says, ‘So are you going to get a superintendent job?’ I say ‘No, I am not going to get a superintendent job—are you crazy? I am not going to get a superintendent job,’” Laurie hissed.

I laughed but understood what she was trying to say about this difficult decision.

Laurie continued, “He was like why not, and I don’t have the personality for it and I have always known that, but he is like ‘Well, you can do it,’ and I say, ‘Why would I do that?’ But, so other people are like, ‘So are you going to get a job where you are moving up?’ and I say, ‘Why would I do that? What on earth about doing anything—why would you do that—because that is the
next logical step in our world. So now I’m trying to look at how I continue to be in this place, in this world, which is still important to me. Again, I want to serve children; I want to make life better in the world for children. I want to keep them safe and help them grow… And education is a great place to do it, because I hate needles and blood and I can’t serve that way, and I love learning, so how do you do that and not be perceived as a failure?” Laurie asked. “When everybody in the world wants nothing more than to move up. I don’t have any desire to work harder.”

At this point I knew Laurie was facing her own struggles. “You know, Laurie, one thing I can tell you is that I do love my work. I feel as if I have a purpose to be a superintendent, and I feel as if I am a more awakened leader (Marques & Dhiman, 2006). In the context of awakened leadership, I am more self-aware. I try to remain down to earth and not forget the steps I took as a learner and teacher to get here.”

Mindfulness and Gender–My Struggles to Make Sense of Gender in the Superintendency

“There are many reasons I enjoy my job,” I said. “I think the thing that is more frustrating to me, is really what I am hearing from the other female superintendents is we feel like we have to work twice as hard as a man does. Why can’t we take off on a Wednesday afternoon and go golfing without somebody looking down on us, where men can do that and it never seems like it is a problem? Is it something internally that I’m doing? In the conversations with the other women superintendents we are trying to decide whether it is an internal pressure; or do we feel as if we are being measured differently than men because we are women in that role?

“Right,” Laurie murmured. I could tell she was still thinking her own thoughts, but I continued sharing mine.
“And so we work twice as hard to be able to say we are good at what we are doing,” I continued.

Laurie looked at me quizzically. “Right. Yes, so think of a time when you stopped yourself from doing something you know a man in your position would have done, you know?”

I paused. “I stopped myself because I have heard that another superintendent years ago was never available at certain times of the week. And I don’t want to be perceived the way he was,” I said.

“Well, but let me just review, because what I heard you say earlier was ‘I stopped myself from doing what a man would do and a man would be fine. But I can’t.’ Just now I heard you say that people didn’t respect that superintendent because he did that.”

I contemplated what she’d said. “You’re right. But they continued to have him back,” I replied.

“So you feel they wouldn’t have you back if you did that?” Laurie prodded.

“No, I’m not saying that; I guess I hear the comments about a previous superintendent and I don’t want, when I leave, to have people say, ‘Oh, she was a slacker,’ or ‘She didn’t get the job done,’ or ‘She put it off for someone else to do the work.’ I really feel as if there were so many decisions that should have been made 2 years ago in my district that would have saved us from a whole lot of grief that we have had this year if they hadn’t been put off. So when I got here it was like I had to make all of these decisions. One of the other superintendents I interviewed said something very similar. There just seems to be a different tolerance and maybe it is my own perceived…”

Laurie interrupted, saying, “Well, I guess what I would ask is, what lets you know that the perceived tolerance is because of gender?”
Her probing questions were making me think. “You know, that is really something I have been struggling with. My whole research, starting 7 years ago, was from a feminist point of view, just in the sense of equality. Brunner (2000), Appelbaum, Audet, and Miller (2003), Becker, Ayman, and Korabik (2002), Cartwright and Gale (1995), Sharratt and Derrington (1993), Grogan (2000), Dunlap and Schmuck (1995), and Tallerico (2000) all shared the difficulties of being a woman superintendent because it has been considered a man’s terrain for so long. I can’t negate those findings. I remember early in my career I didn’t feel gender was an issue. So you know, one of the brand new woman superintendents I talked with said she doesn’t consider gender or her nationality something that is a hindrance.”

“Is it?” Laurie questioned.

“And yet here she is, she has three kids at home, her husband, and she’s a workaholic. And I feel like she is me the very first year I started my superintendency. And she is maybe 6 or 7 years behind me, when I was saying the same thing, that gender doesn’t matter. It’s just the job. And maybe it is just more from what I have read, from my studies—I don’t play the gender card, but I recognize that men and women are treated differently.”

“Oh my God yeah,” Laurie proclaimed. “In our profession. In my experience, a couple of years ago we had an associate superintendent who was so dumb and so inept that if he had been a woman I believe he would have been someone’s general office secretary, maybe.” She paused. “And probably not very good at that. But he was the deputy superintendent, so I totally believe gender matters; what I am wanting to have you consider is what are the triggers that are, like, letting you know that gender is a factor you need to use so you can just be conscious of what lets you know that.” Laurie’s question made me think deeply. “Because I don’t know if I am conscious of mine,” she continued. “To me, if I believe that stress is internal, and if I want to
find a way through that, because again mindfulness is very good at bringing it up . . .” she said. In a bright voice, as if to be mindfulness talking, she pantomimed and said, “Hello???”

I laughed.

She continued, “and then allowing you to be with it. And then you get to go through it, if you choose.”

“Right,” I said. “And I think that maybe just what you were asking ‘How do you know that it’s gender? Or how do you even know…”

Laurie interrupted me again. “Different question. It is not how, it’s what lets you know.”

“If what lets you know it is gender,” I repeated. “And I think that as I have become more mindful, I am able to recognize the reasons I do things, and there is a lot of research (Brunner, 2000; Burns, 1978; Eagly, 2002; Book, 2001) about women being more effective leaders in this reform era in the sense that they understand empathy, they hear what people say, they have a transformational leadership style. I think there is a lot to being mindful and being a good leader as well (Marques & Dhiman, 2006). Some of the research I’ve read about using mindfulness in organizations (Thomas, Schermerhorn, & Dienhart, 2004) really attunes to that. I guess sometimes I think that there are just too few authors out there (Eagly, 2002) who recognize the leadership qualities of women. Everything that is there is as history—that you are born a leader—it is really changing to the effect that now they are noticing the attributes that women have, which are more tuned to mindful behaviors sometimes, and are actually good leadership skills. And why do we have to work so hard when research is saying the work we are doing is positive and makes a difference? I would venture to say that the women superintendents I know do make a difference. I see a lot of work being done, and I find it interesting that Dr. Gates, when I talked to him on the phone, was telling me how Anna was struggling with her superintendent and was
saying, ‘I wish I had a superintendent who was mindful.’ And Dr. Gates told her, ‘I know one who is.’ I just wonder: Do women, in their own way, have the ability to be more mindful?’”

“Have you read Kawakami, White, and Langer’s (2000) article?” Laurie asked. “The article is all about how mindfulness helps free women leaders from the constraints of gender roles.”

“Yes,” I replied. “The article really details the paradox female leaders face: If they emulate a masculine leadership style, their male subordinates will dislike them. If they adopt a warm and nurturing feminine style, they will be liked, but not respected” (p. 49).

“The most enlightening point of this research is finding that female leaders who are mindful can escape the paradox. I find that amazing,” Laurie declared.

Smiling, I replied, “I too believe reading that study helped me understand this gender paradox. As I said, through using personal experience and my years of study of women superintendent literature, I think this study really makes a positive statement for mindful women leaders.”

“Well, the study might get closer to your earlier question about whether women have the ability to be more mindful, but I can’t answer that question,” Laurie said.

“I can’t either,” I agreed.

Laurie said quietly, “I think mindfulness is a solo effort and is an inside job, and only the person experiencing it knows for sure.”

“Boy, you have really hit that nail on the head. It is a journey that is so personal—when you look at Eastern and Western thought—they so co-mingle, and I don’t know that there is one correct path to becoming more mindful. I think there are several different ways to be mindful. Like Gordon (2005) talking about how you can be more mindful when you do dishes. He notes
that most Westerners think of sitting meditation as meditation, but there are many forms of
meditation, including breathing, sitting, walking, yoga, loving-kindness, and insight. Hanh
(1991), cited by Gates (2005), described how hearing the telephone ring, stopping at a red light,
washing dishes, drinking tea, and eating a tangerine are a few of the day-to-day kinds of
activities that can easily be used for meditation."

**How Are We As Leaders Remaining Mindful?**

Laurie spoke again. “Anjana Sen (2010) relates several methods of practicing
mindfulness, including doing any of the following with 100% attention: play a game, solve a
puzzle, listen, be with Nature, create something, pray, feel grateful, dance, do something for the
first time, have an adventure, learn to play a musical instrument, get into Flow at something you
do well, and meditate.”

“And I find Sen’s observations to be valid for me,” I responded. “In looking at our jobs,
Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2000) listed five qualities that move leaders toward more mindful
action. He encouraged leaders to cultivate humility by appreciating the traps inherent in short-
term success and false optimism; to seek variety by looking for the diversity of experience,
expertise, and perspective; to invent new models by loosening hierarchies to expand the
networks of expertise; to be flexible by looking at ways to foster true resilience to offset lapses in
anticipation and forecasting; to build excess capacity and remember that redundant positions, if
lost, may limit expertise; and finally, to question assumptions by understanding that leadership is
as much about managing error as it is about achieving goals.”

I smiled and told Laurie, “All of these different ways to achieve mindfulness are what has
made cultivating it possible for me. It seemed, when I first started reading about this, so
unattainable—as if I would never be able to get there. We’ve talked about how it’s not helpful to
have a “get there” mentality, which is what I had initially in my goal-oriented way; and now I am better able to have the attitude that, whatever’s happening, it’s just here, it’s just now. I ask myself often: Am I present? Am I really here?”

“Is there anything we’ve missed?” Laurie asked.

“In your journey, what benefits of mindfulness have you noticed?” I questioned. “You’ve talked about your road to change. What have you noticed?”

I knew Laurie was thinking about the best response to give me. I waited. Finally she said, “To me, what mindfulness does is allow me to remember. And I know that is a past tense word, and I know mindfulness is about the present, but it allows me to come back to the present.” She paused and then turned a question back to me. “What other benefits have you read about?”

Benefits to Me As a Superintendent

“I have read several studies that list benefits,” I answered. “Muyzenberg coauthored a book with the Dalai Lama (2008) citing the benefits of mindfulness as seen in CEOs who were practicing mindfulness in life and leadership. They mentioned that they made better decisions; had more self-confidence and no longer worried what other employees might think of them; were much better able to cope with stress; were more open-minded; and were more easily able to deal with crises by being aware of impermanence.”

“Is there more?” Laurie asked.

“I have found out that our Western society is in the early stages of using mindfulness to reduce stress, to ease persistent pain, and to change behaviors. Davidson (2011) observed that the 1960s was a behaviorism heyday and none of the research focused on the mind. Now that many researchers are focusing on the intricacies of the mind, researchers and clinicians suggest
that the cultivation of mindfulness may be beneficial to Westerners uninterested in adopting Buddhist or other Eastern spiritual traditions (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004).”

I continued, ‘What’s exciting to me is that research is being completed on how mindfulness can help reduce stress (Sawyer-Cohen & Miller, 2009; Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997; Hahn, 1998; Muyzenberg & Lama XIV, 2008; Astin, 1997; McCraty, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2003). Also, research into mindfulness in leadership is beginning to emerge (Muyzenberg & Lama XIV, 2008; Carroll, 2004; Marques & Dhiman, 2006; Nakai & Schultz, 2000). However, there is limited research on the use of mindfulness in the educational setting to reduce stress for school administrators.’”

“There you go,” said Laurie. “Maybe you can write a book about this someday.”

I grinned and threw my pen at her. “I feel the most important result for me is my health. So do you notice any physical changes?” I asked Laurie. “Sen (2010) listed several benefits: lower blood pressure, regulated blood sugar, lower heart rate, improved digestive function, improved immunity and healing, positive mood, higher energy, ability to concentrate on tasks, and the ability to think creatively. Do you notice any of those changes?”

“Um, yeah, I am calmer,” she said.

“Describe that calmness,” I pressed.

“I don’t feel the need to get out of my movie seat as much,” she laughed. I laughed too and said, “I guess when you talk about the movie seat I think of the author who described how you watch a movie and get so caught up in that, but if you actually turn back and you look back, you see that it’s just beams of light; yet you can get so caught up you are watching the movie and not thinking.” I thought of how many times in the past I had been just like that.
“I know there are several more benefits, and I know I’m changing for the better,” I continued.

“What are you experiencing?” Laurie asked.

“Pain,” I laughed. “But I think that’s okay. I notice changes. It’s more just the pain that comes with the awareness of lost time. You know, I got a Christmas card from a dear friend last year and there was a poem in it called ‘The Journey.’ Are you familiar with it?”

“I’m not sure. Tell me more,” Laurie suggested.

“Your life is like being on a train, and you’re saying, *When I get there it will be good, when I reach this spot it will be good,* and that is kind of how I have always viewed my life—I’ve been heading to get to some place, and then you finally find out it is not the place, it is the journey to get there that matters. And so I guess when you talk about pain, it’s just in the sense that I mourn the loss of the years that I have not spent in the moment.”

I paused for a moment, collected myself, and continued, “I do notice I am a lot calmer. When I first started my doctoral program and my superintendency, I would get these anxiety attacks, panic attacks—my heart rate would just go through the roof, and I would stress about things and I could feel internally the physical feelings with my stomach churning and my heart sometimes feeling like it wanted to flip-flop out of my chest. I rarely have that happen now. I really have noticed that before a board meeting or a difficult meeting, if I start to feel antsy, I’ll go in and sit down and breathe in calm and breathe out smiles, and it’s amazing to me that the time of 15 or 20 minutes goes by quickly; it’s as if my mind takes a rest. It steps off the hamster wheel, if that makes sense. For me, I don’t know if I have hit any Nirvana or any other state, or that I’ve had an epiphany; it’s more like I have just been able to,” I paused, “be me, and relax and feel as if I’m here and the end of the journey is not the most important thing.”
I continued, wanting Laurie to hear my thoughts. “I really think by being more mindful and taking every day…Gary and I try to walk every day now, and I notice things in nature—the flowers blooming, the wind moving leaves and branches. I smell the coffee in the morning. I enjoy my shower and feel the individual droplets hitting my skin and smell the shampoo and soap. I know it sounds silly, but that’s what I have gained through this process—I didn’t do that before. Does that sound silly?”

“No, not at all,” Laurie said.

“Do you think our research is important?” I questioned out of the blue.

“I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t think it was important,” Laurie said.

“That is where I am at,” I declared. “There are so many benefits, and what I am finding is that because mindfulness from the standpoint of Western thought is so new—I know you have been thinking about this from an Eastern perspective and the practices have been there for thousands of years—this is not something mystical, and people can make small changes in course direction to be more mindful, changes that could affect their daily life. So I think it’s important to continue this work as well.”

Laurie interjected, “I feel spent.”

“I do too.” I paused. “I had no idea that this talk would take the turn that it did. I expected to stay frank,” I caught a sob in my throat, “umm…and have a scholarly conversation about this.”

“You expected a conversation of the head, instead of the heart,” Laurie so wisely whispered.
Between sobs I said, “So there you go. I can’t thank you enough for taking the time to allow me to share from the heart.” I shut the recorder off. This emotional discussion seemed to drain all of the energy we had between us.

**Saying Goodbye to a Stranger**

The next morning we headed out early to catch the 8:00 ferry back to Anacortes. After another long quiet ride back, Laurie dropped me off so I could catch the 10:00 train at the Everett station. I turned and said goodbye, once again, to a stranger with whom my only connection was a mutual interest in mindfulness. I could tell from Laurie’s body language and silence on the way back that perhaps this would be the last time I would meet with her for such an in-depth discussion. I knew our original plan had been to meet again, but it seemed we both knew instinctively it would never happen. Maybe too much had been shared by each of us too quickly, and maybe the only thing we had in common had been covered. When we’d started working together those long months beforehand, it had seemed we were both looking at a weathervane with strong, but indecisive winds pointing the vane first in one and then another direction, just like us trying to determine which direction our data would take us. My weathervane pointed to using mindfulness to reduce stress…when I left Laurie at the train station, I still didn’t know where her weathervane was pointed. I never was able to tease out of Laurie what was bothering her during the weekend or what direction she was headed with her study.

While I was on the train home, I truly enjoyed the journey. I made three new friends, whose names I still remember; I watched gaggles of geese in V formations moving across the sky; and I meditated to the sound of the train clacking on the tracks.
CHAPTER FIVE

BEING A SUPERINTENDENT

Meeting With Jane

Jane called me shortly after she had heard of my student uprising about the closed campus. She asked me if my husband and I would like to join her and her husband Chris on a dinner date. We planned to meet the following Saturday evening at a restaurant that was located at a local hotel.

My husband spied the couple sitting at the table by the window at the restaurant before I did. They both jumped up, and Jane and I gave each other a big hug and the guys gave each other the handshake, slap each other on the back hug that guys do.

“Well, school is going well, considering, and we still have our hair,” Jane joked.

“That’s more than I can say about our husbands,” I joked back. Both Gary and Chris had receding hairlines.

Soon Gary and Chris were telling fishing stories and Jane and I had a chance to talk. Jane was very well-respected throughout the state, and in addition to being superintendent at a large district, she was an adjunct professor at a local college. We started talking about when we first became superintendents.

Jane said, “I remember about the third month I became a superintendent, thinking I was a pioneer—you know, a warrior woman. I could see myself in a picture and perceived myself as like the biggest person in the room. And sometimes, I would see a picture and say, “My God, that can’t be me—who is that?”

We laughed. We talked about the continued challenges we faced as superintendents.
Jane observed, “I find it funny, but I perceive myself as very strong. Then my thyroid gave out, with the condition of stress. I have hyper-thyroid, which is brought on by stress. It’s a one-way thing and you can’t fix it. Anyway, I suppose it’s a blessing…but stress has impacted me since I became a superintendent. That is the bottom line.”

The waitress brought a bottle of wine to the table along with the hors d’oeuvres we had ordered. Gary poured us all a glass of red wine and then we went back to our individual conversations. Jane explained more about her health condition and mentioned that she had trouble keeping her weight steady because of it. She seemed quite thin. She told me, “Now I’m committed to being able to do the work without sacrificing my health. I see a lot of people who have made that sacrifice. It worries me for our profession.”

She continued, “Do you ever find yourself here at 5:00 P.M. and you hear crickets, and it makes you angry because you think, There are a lot of things on my desk that a lot of other people know about, and we ought to be able to roll up our sleeves and do these things, and so I am thinking–no matter where you go, and this is my new theory, being a superintendent is damn hard work.”

“Yes, I work a lot of long hours as well,” I concurred. “What are you doing to try to cope with the stress?” I asked her.

“Hmmm, I’m not very good about doing anything on a daily basis,” Jane said. “I try to get away for part of the day for the weekend. Most weeks I live the job. Hike a little bit, watch dumb TV, I sleep…I sleep hard…I am really a hard worker. Most stressors for me are things that happened in the past that are now issues and my problems. They are the district’s issues, so they are my issues.”
“I hear you there, Jane. That’s why I’m studying mindfulness, to help me cope with stress,” I said. “My administrative team voluntarily agreed to try some activities this year as well.”

Jane asked me, “How are you helping your administrators understand mindfulness?”

“I’ve done several activities with them so far,” I answered. “Since school started, I’ve used *A Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook*, written by Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein (2011) as a guide to take the principals through a series of short mindfulness activities.”

“Is it easy to use?” she asked. “And does it work with administrators?”

Before I could answer, the waitress came back to take our dinner order. The special of the day was pan-seared scallops with wild rice. We all ordered the special and another bottle of wine to go with dinner.

I said, “Where was I? Oh yes. The first mindfulness activity I did involved having the principals mindfully observe and then eat an orange. I handed each principal a plump, juicy orange and asked them all to feel the texture of the skin with their eyes closed. I saw a lot of puzzled looks when they first started.”

“What was the purpose of the activity?” Jane questioned.

“Most of it had to do with being very mindful and noticing a common item in a novel way. They had to smell the orange peel and pay close attention as they began to peel the orange. I asked them to smell the rind as it was peeled and notice the feelings of the white pulp on their fingers and under their fingernails. Finally, I asked them to bite into the orange and notice the flavors. Two of the principals commented on how much more they noticed,” I said.

Jane asked, “Would you recommend I try it with my team?”
I answered, “Sure. We did a second activity like this a week later with a raisin. We discussed how this could be done with any mundane everyday object as long as it is held in the hand and attention is fully focused on the object. We then talked about how easy it was to miss out on the details. It really was fun and an easy way to help the team begin to understand the basic concept of being mindful.”

“Did you do other activities as well?” Jane asked.

“Yes,” I responded. “I asked them, as another activity, to pay close attention when they woke up every day during that next week. They were encouraged to, as soon as they woke up, thank their body for carrying them to and from activities during the day. I asked them to notice when they got in the shower, if their mind was already at work thinking and planning for the day; if so, they were to bring their mind back to the present by smelling the soap, feeling the sensation of water on their body, and listening to the sounds of the water in the shower. I encouraged them to practice a morning routine for the week that included being very present in the moment as they prepared to get ready for work.”

“That sounds easy,” Jane said.

“It is,” I replied. “We had to laugh the next week when staff reported back on their experiences. I practice this mindfulness activity myself almost every day now. It really starts my day off in a positive direction.”

I explained to Jane about another activity I had done with the team, leading them through breathing exercises similar to those I used.

“What does that look like?” Jane asked.
“First of all, I asked them to sit up straight in their chairs with both feet on the floor,” I said to Jane. I demonstrated to Jane how I sat with my hands lying lightly on my thighs, with my palms up. Jane’s husband looked over at me quizzically but said nothing.

“I asked the team to breathe in and out, thinking on the in breath of breathing in calm and thinking on the out breath of breathing out smiles. I explained how to be aware when thoughts come into the mind and how to place them gently into the palm of their hands and continue with the mantra to breathe in calm and breathe out smiles. It was a little tense around the table as I gave the directions,” I continued.

Jane replied, “I hear breathing is often used as the focus of meditation because it is a universal process.”

“Yeah, you have to breathe!” I exclaimed. We laughed. I continued, “We did this activity several times at the beginnings of our book studies. When we later had an academic team meeting with a large group of teachers and the administrators, the principals asked me to share this breathing exercise with the group. The entire academic team joined in on the breathing exercise.”

“Did you ask your principals what they thought about this breathing activity?” Jane questioned.

I reported, “One principal told me, ‘I remember to breathe by thinking, ‘Smell the soup, cool the soup’ so that I breathe deeply in through my nostrils and then exhale with my mouth.’”

“Any other activities that you did?” Jane asked.

“There was one that I was nervous about doing. It was called the full body scan,” I said.

“That sounds different,” Jane said.
I laughed. “It’s not what it sounds like. I read from a script for them to follow. It started out like this: ‘Allow your eyes to close gently, if you feel comfortable with that, and bring the arms alongside the body with the palms open to the ceiling. Take a moment to feel the body as a whole right now. Now bring attention to the fact that you are breathing, not changing the breath in any way, but simply experiencing the air as it comes into and out of the body. Become aware of the abdomen rising as the air comes into the body, and falling as the air moves out of the body. Not controlling the breath in any way. Rather, just become aware of the rhythm and flow of the breath, noticing that as the breath flows naturally, the abdomen lifts with each in breath, and falls as the breath moves out.’ That's all I can remember from the script,” I said. “It continues with a description of noticing and relaxing all of your body parts.”

“All of them?” Jane asked me jokingly.

“Actually, when I was reading the script, I skipped any parts that might seem too personal to them. I don't think they knew I skipped any parts,” I said.

“What did they say about all of this?” Jane probed.

“I asked them how they felt after the scan. Overall, they indicated they felt more relaxed and less tense,” I said. “I actually asked them what they learned from all of the activities so far. One principal explained that she thought mindfulness was about awareness and taking a look at what she’s doing and the people around her in relationship with the goals she has. Another principal did a good job of explaining. She said she thought when she got stressed, she tightened up and she was not able to focus on one thing that had to be done because too many things were in her brain. She went on to say whereas if she had just stopped and taken a breath and relaxed, and got within herself, she might have been able to focus on the one thing that needed to be taken care of first. She went on to say the point was to relax the brain and stop its frantic movements.”
“That’s pretty insightful.” Jane raised her eyebrows and smiled. “It sounds like they heard something you said during your initial activities and conversations.”

“I think so,” I replied. “I really liked it when one principal described mindfulness as ‘quiet get away time for your brain.’ He also said he liked the idea of just taking a break from everything to be within himself, and also of having a goal to be more mindful in how he treated people and reacted to things and facing life. But he also said he thought it would take a lot more practice.”

“Are you going to continue mindfulness activities the rest of this year?” Jane asked.

“Yes. I want to give them some articles about mindfulness and continue to do a few more activities this year,” I said.

“I’ll be curious to see how it goes. I hope you’ll let me know how this turns out,” Jane continued.

“Sure, I’ll be glad to share,” I promised. We looked up as the waitress arrived with our order. The rest of the evening was filled with more conversation among the four of us, and we left at the end of the evening vowing to get together more often. Jane and I agreed to meet at the school board director’s conference, which was coming up in the next month, for a few minutes between sessions.

**School Board Ah-ha’s**

I had called both Jane and Joel the week before the annual school board conference, which was being held in Bellevue, Washington, to confirm that they were attending. Jane had confirmed that she and her board would be in attendance. Joel and his board had decided not to attend due to district financial issues and because it would be an expensive trip across the state. I told Joel I would get extra handouts on anything important and call him when I got back. I knew
already from many of my journal entries that often when I was stressed, it was because I was concerned about whether my school board approved of the work I was doing. Joel and I had talked earlier about this when he’d said he wasn’t going that year.

“In one way, I’m relieved,” he said. “There’s always a lot of pressure at these conferences. I’m always afraid one of the board members will listen to a session and tell me that new approach or program is what we have to do next.”

We laughed. I said, “Did you know there was a researcher (Cooper et al., 2000, p. 8) who discovered that 90% of superintendents asserted the school board should give them ‘more help, and support to ensure their well-being and job success’?”

“Is this something you’ve learned in your dissertation work?” Joel questioned. He went on, “I know we didn’t hear about this in our internship classes, but I agree with that statement. I do have a great board, and I think after being in this district so long we really understand each other.”

“Yes,” I answered him, “this is something I learned about through my research. I found some very interesting articles as I researched stress and the Superintendency. I also found out from Hawk and Martin (2011, p. 364), who quoted Glass and Franceschini (2007), that “coping, understanding, and reducing superintendent stress should be a high priority for school boards and professional associations serving superintendents and boards.”

“Well, you just tell your board that on your trip,” Joel said, partly as a joke.

“I’m afraid I don’t know them well enough yet. I’ll tell you about how I fared and what you missed when I get back,” I said as we concluded our conversation.

School board conferences are ones I always looked forward to and dreaded at the same time. When taking my entire team of board of directors, I always wanted to make sure the
conference went off without any problems, and I always felt as if I had to be in work mode. We had chosen, this year, to drive together to the conference. It was the first time I had been in a more relaxed setting (for them) with all of the board members, and I was looking forward to getting to know them better, while at the same time stressing over making sure it all went well.

Once we arrived, we decided to meet a few hours later for dinner. Since I had just gotten back the week before from China where I had worked with Chinese educators and students, the only thing I requested was that we not go out for Chinese food. When we met to walk to dinner, one of the members told us about a really good restaurant. I didn't recognize the name and was surprised when we ended up at a Dim Sum restaurant that served mostly Chinese food. I didn't say anything, but my feelings were hurt because I thought they hadn’t heard me. I thought to myself, *What difference does one more Chinese meal make in the grand scheme of things? This too shall pass.* I mindfully decided to enjoy the situation. We had a great dinner and I actually liked the food. By the end of the meal I had dismissed my earlier feelings by recognizing my false assumptions, making alternative positive feelings possible.

We talked about how superintendents get to know their new school districts. Steve, the board chair, had some insightful comments: “It’s really an interesting thing because there are two levels that you have to acquaint a superintendent with—one is the obvious policies, the physical plant, the way we do things, and the other thing is the dance that takes place between the superintendent and the board that’s building the relationship to get stuff done. The first part is really simple—it is just the orientation process—it takes a long time to find all of the hidden things—but the real thing is hitting if off. That is developing the relationship so that there is trust, effectiveness. And you can’t write a script to do that; you just have to feel your way along. I think that is the best indicator [of] if you are going to have a successful experience or not, is
whether or not you can get along on that level and develop the trust fairly rapidly. I don’t know what the script is, but that is what we have to do.”

“I agree,” I said. “I think learning about the physical plant is far easier than the other things you described.”

Hannah, who had been a board member for almost 20 years, jumped in. She said, “One of the biggest challenges is needing to spend time with the superintendent, and you don’t have that much time. That is certainly a roadblock. I think most board members have been in the community for a long time. Superintendents are the ones who move from community to community. Superintendents probably have a lot of pre-conceived ideas about the way the community works, based on their prior experiences. So getting that uniqueness of our community out is a challenge because you didn’t live in their former community or work in their former school district, so it is hard to try to put each other in each other’s shoes and try to develop the common traits between their old experience and new experience and help them understand the differences and the uniqueness.”

Steve agreed. He said, “In order to learn more and become good working partners, time is extremely important.”

“That’s why these type of conferences are critical,” I said. “Not only are we learning valuable information from the conference, we’re learning valuable information from each other.”

Steve continued, “I enjoy one-on-one time with you as our superintendent as well. It helps in developing our relationship, but helps in understanding you and you in understanding the board in where we are going—so the direction is much easier once you have spent the more intimate time talking about philosophy.”
Hannah observed, “School boards are an interesting animal—it took like the first term to understand what type of animal they are, and I’m not even sure I got it the first term. It’s an extremely important role, and you look back and see that you have accomplished a lot. It’s not like other elected boards—you’re not running the district—the superintendent is running the district. It takes a while to understand that, especially if you’re used to other boards and commissions where the commissioners usually run the operation. It’s almost an unholy marriage—maybe it’s a basic tenet of basic education [people] who realized folks wanted local control but needed stability in uniformity and education so had to be that way. But until you’re in it, you don’t understand. Maybe [in] a large corporation with a weak board of directors, but I don’t even think you would find it there. It is a unique thing. You don’t know it until you are in it. It is like when you say new board member, new board. I can’t imagine being a superintendent in a district where the board changes often—it has got to be a nightmare, and I think people who have agendas is one of the weaknesses of the system.”

I tried to catch everything she was trying to tell me. Before I had a chance to respond, Steve continued, “I think superintendents sometimes get a little narrow in their focus, and the board broadens them out a little bit. Your main job as a superintendent is really instructional leadership, and a secondary and maybe equal role is the business operations–financial operations of the district. But sometimes those two roles need to be balanced differently than the superintendent would like to do them, and I think the board needs to and does give them direction on that balance. The board’s role is to determine what works in the community and what will work in the community. We help you balance what is best from the educational perspective and public acceptance standpoint.”
“I appreciate your wisdom,” I said as the stress level of the conversation increased. I told them sincerely that I hoped to be able to live up to their expectations. This dinner discussion reiterated the precarious balance school superintendents have with their elected school boards. As I took more time later that year and made mindful steps to truly get to know the board members better on an individual basis, I noticed my journaling did not include any more board nightmares or anything stressful about working with them.

The next morning I was able to catch up with Jane. We decided the best way to have some time to talk would be to meet right after the last session for about an hour. That would leave us a few minutes to get freshened up to go out to dinner with our respective board members again. We met in the hotel lounge and sat at a table that overlooked Bellevue Square. It was just starting to get dark and I thought I saw snowflakes in the air.

“They’re not real,” Jane commented as she saw me watching the flakes swirl to the ground. “When I walked over from the mall last night, I saw them being shot out of a fake snow-machine from the top of the roof in an irregular pattern.” We both laughed. Having come from a side of the state where I dreaded snow and lived with it for half of the year, I was amused by this contradiction.

I proceeded to tell Jane about my evening meal with my board. After I finished, she said, “Getting to know and work with my board took me by surprise. I had previously worked in a district with a very stable board. They were a pretty hands-off board and didn’t really get involved in managing the district—they just let me continue as long as I wasn’t causing major problems. This new district has a board that is much more involved. I find myself explaining management issues a lot more than I did in my old district. I am trying to help the new board
members understand their roles as well. This conference is a time for us to get to know each other a little better.”

I thought about the snowflakes, and thought of how my relationship with my board was like the snowflakes. They look so real until you get up close to them. Was I being real with my board, or was I doing what I thought they wanted just to please them? Were we dancing around each other like the flakes in the streetlamps, trying to get to know and work with each other? How long would it take each of us to truly trust each other? I was lost in thought for a moment.

“Well, soon enough we’ll have to make the early morning call for whether the schools will be open or closed due to weather,” Jane said, pulling me back into the conversation. “The worst times are always late winter or early spring,” she continued.

“I’m nervous about that because in my old district we never cancelled school, but it was a different, dry type of snow,” I said.

“The districts in your area of the state have to close schools quite often,” Jane informed me. “Have fun with that one. Those decisions can be quite political. Who would think seeing snowflakes or rain would cause such grave concern? I remember having to cancel a huge home wrestling tournament because of freezing rain. The parents were mad, the coaches were mad, the fans were mad. Until they closed all of the roads and the power went out. Then they were glad they weren't stuck with a hundred wrestlers and no power.” She sighed and I could tell she was reliving the situation.

Jane gave me a few suggestions on how to prepare and make the best decision on calling a snow day when the time came. I appreciated her advice. It was nice to touch base again and discuss how our year was going. Jane remembered I was doing mindfulness activities with my principals, and that was the next thing she asked about.
“How are your mindfulness activities going with the principals?” she asked. “Are you still doing something with mindfulness?”

“Yes, I still am sharing with them and we’ve tried some different activities,” I said. I explained to Jane that I encouraged the principals to find a technique that worked for them and practice it at some time during the day. Because they had volunteered to experience these exercises, I did not give them any expectations that they had to do anything more than just learn and be aware of each of the practices. I left it up to each individual to determine whether he or she wanted to go further with the exercises on personal time.

“We did a really fun activity that I want to tell you about,” I said.

Jane smiled. “Tell me about it,” she said.

“Well, because some of the principals commute at least 20 miles to get to work, I asked them to focus, for one week, on preparing for the drive and driving to work. I asked them to walk slowly to the car, noticing any tension, and to try to soften the tension. I encouraged them, as they were driving, to try driving a little slower and to let red lights and stop signs be reminders to notice any tenseness in their shoulders and to notice their breath. The following week it was really fun to hear them talk about their driving experiences,” I said.

“What did they notice?” Jane asked.

“Well, one principal said she didn't get pulled over for speeding. She was joking when she said it, but she did also say she noticed how often she drove on ‘autopilot’ after I had made her aware of it, and she vowed to pay more attention to the daily drive,” I told her. I continued. “You know, since we last talked, I’ve spent more time just bringing a research article and reading parts of it to them that I thought might be pertinent. Because one of my principals battled cancer, I read the team an article about how mindfulness can help boost the immune system (Davidson
2003; Creswell, Myers, Cole, & Irwin, 2008). One principal had chronic knee pain and I read about how mindfulness-based stress reduction was used to teach patients with chronic medical conditions how to live fuller, healthier, more adaptive lives (Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Rosenzweig, 2001). Another principal dealt with heart palpitations, and I read the principals a study on how mindfulness can be used to help regulate heart rate (Delizonna, Williams, & Langer, 2009).

“That is really interesting stuff,” Jane replied. “I would like to know more about the immune system article. Will you send it to me?”

“Sure, be glad to,” I responded. “Another thing I shared with my principals that you might be interested in is mindfulness and high reliability organizations (Ashforth & Fried, 1988; Khisty, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999, 2000). I talked to my team about the importance of reporting errors and discussing weaknesses in the system.”

I told Jane I had noted that by having an academic team, which is a standing committee made up of teachers and administrators, spend a day looking at our system weaknesses, we were able to set specific goals for improvement. I explained to Jane how I encouraged the administrative team to feel comfortable and encouraged them to report errors.

“Teena, this is fascinating information. I really am intrigued and would like to learn more,” Jane said.

“I’ll be glad to send you anything you would like to read. Sometimes I shared with my principals articles from education magazines that discussed mindfulness practices in educational settings. You may have read some of them in Educational Leadership (2007, 2009) magazine,” I said.
“I don't think I’ve seen any of those articles. I’d like to read what you find that has to do with our daily work and how we can improve it,” Jane commented.

I continued, “You know, there were three different times when one of the principals would bring in an article on mindfulness that one of them had found, and the principal who found it shared the information with me and the group. One principal did a great job of sending little reminders about being mindful via email. She would often have a cute picture with a short mindfulness slogan attached.”

“Have the principals noticed anything different about you as you are studying this?” Jane asked.

“That’s the exciting part of this work, Jane, because they have noticed changes. I asked them at the end of our book study whether they had noticed any mindful practices on my part. One principal told me she could specifically think of an instance in just the last couple of weeks. She said I was very careful not to react. She said she wasn’t sure if that was being mindful or just being smart. I remember the incident: I was being talked at and talked at and the principal was surprised that I didn’t react at all. It was uncomfortable for the person talking to me because the individual expected to see emotion. My principal thought it was a great way to handle a situation,” I said.

“Did they say anything else?” Jane pressed.

“One principal noticed a change since the beginning of the year. I got a note from her and she said something like, ‘There was the budget situation which was very difficult and you seem so composed and so relaxed in a stressful situation. I think you have changed a lot. You are still focused and driven but you seem different to me.’ Finally, one other principal told me that I seem a lot more relaxed. He said there were a lot of big situations I’d had to deal with so
far this year and I seem to be unwinding as the year progresses and I seem to exude calmness always,” I said. “I find it interesting to hear their perspectives on how this work is affecting me,” I added.

“I think I’ll try some of this work this next year. I just have to learn more about it myself before I can share it with my team,” Jane said.

“Always glad to help.” I smiled. I looked at my watch and said, “But it isn’t going to be today. I have to get going so I’m not late meeting my board members.” We said our goodbyes and both rushed off to meet our groups.

After the conference was over, I reflected on how I felt about the time I had spent with the board members. It was unexpectedly pleasant, and far less stressful than I had anticipated. I wondered if that was because I was being more mindful and really listening to what they said—more interested in truly getting to know them than in just trying to please them by doing everything right. My thoughts from the beginning of the conference about snowflake dances had changed. I recognized the board members and I were starting to develop a mutual trust.

I gave Joel a call shortly after I got back from the conference. I had scanned handouts I thought were important and forwarded them to him. I wanted to check in and see if he had gotten the materials.

“Hey, thanks for sending that information my way,” Joel said. “How did it go?”

“It was actually enjoyable,” I said.

“Well that’s surprising,” Joel commented. “Usually I’m drained when I get back from that conference.”

“I was tired for sure,” I said. “But it was really worthwhile. I learned a lot about my board, and I hope they learned some things about me.”
Levy Success

I wouldn’t talk to Joel again until 3 months later, after the levy passed. My journal entry captured the magic of the evening when they finished counting all of the levy election votes:

*Words can’t say how excited I am!! We passed the levy at almost 55%!* Jeff, my former levy chair, was one of the first people I called from the Auditor’s office that evening. He was so proud of me and our levy committee. He said “I told you you could do it Teena. I should have bet you something because I would have won the bet on how close the percentage was to what I guessed it would be.”

The levy committee was waiting at a local lodge to find out the results. When I called I could hear the room erupt in cheering and I couldn’t stop the tears of joy from running down my face. The local sheriff, who was at the auditor’s office waiting as well, gave me a big bear hug and congratulated me. Wow…what an elated feeling especially after being told for months that it wouldn’t pass.

As I drove to the Lodge where everyone was waiting I tried to process how I was feeling. It was indescribable. It was if a heavy weight was lifted off of my shoulders and I knew it would be okay.

The same eruption of applause and cheering happened when I walked through the door of the Lodge meeting room. Again, the tears flowed down my cheeks. People came up and hugged me, handed me a glass of champagne, and before I had a chance to give a toast the levy chairs stood up in front of the group and toasted me. I can’t describe how amazing that felt. I tried to compose myself and remember to thank all of the people in the room who made our success possible. Before I spoke, I just stopped for a minute and looked mindfully around the room. These people, who I have spent the last five months with, looked like saints to me. I was so thankful for all of the hard work and dedication they showed to make this levy successful.

And Gary waited until everyone had a chance to congratulate me and then he sidled up next to me, gave me a hug and said “I am so proud of you Babe.”
The phone calls and emails started early the next morning. Superintendents from around the state either called or emailed congratulations. Joel and Jane both called and said they were amazed that it passed the first time around, especially since all of the other districts in the county had levies that had failed to pass.

I had an interesting discussion with the newspaper editor that week. I remembered my original hostilities toward him for his levy coverage, but as I discussed setting up weekly meetings with him so I could keep him in the know on school happenings, I gained understanding of why he wrote some of his first articles. He said, “I had been hearing since I moved here—you and I are both newbies to this community—I heard some people very negative about the schools. I thought if I brought it out right away it would give your levy team a platform to work from. I voted yes for the levy, but I was so new to my position I didn’t feel like I could take a public stand for it until I knew a little bit more about what was happening. I know you were really mad at me and I have to admit I was a little harsh at first, but I’m glad it passed.”

“Me too,” I said sheepishly, thinking about the idle threats in my mind of Ex-Lax brownies. I smiled.

“But that doesn’t mean I am not going to dog you on making sure you and the District spend those levy dollars wisely. Those are people’s tax dollars and they deserve to have an accounting of how you are spending levy money,” he challenged.

This time I agreed with him. I explained the process the district would use to separate out levy funding and keep track of expenditures and then at the end of the year, give a public report on how the money was spent.

“I will remind you about that, so don’t be surprised,” he warned.
I was beginning to enjoy his quick wit and banter back and forth. I felt like I was playing a cat and mouse game and that he wanted to make sure I was on my toes. What a change in attitude I had from the very first time I’d sat down with him.

**Personal Gains**

I noticed changes in my personal life as well. Gary told me that he noticed that when I dealt with people, I didn’t use knee-jerk reactions anymore and that I was a lot calmer. He said, “Teena, you don’t let things overwhelm you anymore. You are calm; instead of reacting instantaneously, you slow yourself down. If there is something that bugs you or something you need from me, you actually approach it thinking about the other person too. That has made life a lot easier for me. I even notice you approach Brett differently. Like for instance, instead of jumping down his throat about an issue, you calm yourself down and approach it rationally. And instead of getting into a conflict, you back off and look at other ways to approach something. Sometimes always being right isn’t worth the conflict, and I think you have learned that.”

“Thanks, dear. That means a lot to me,” I said.

“Just the fact that you are back to your passion of painting is amazing. You talked about wanting to get back to painting for years. I’ve bought you canvases, a new easel, paintbrushes to try to get you to get back into it, but you’ve always let other things take precedence over doing that, even though you know how much you like it and that it relaxes you,” Gary continued.

“Plus, now that you’re painting, you are really noticing things around you more. You can pick anything to paint and you are being so mindful of what you are seeing. I know the last picture of the flowers in the wheelbarrow is something that people pass by everyday downtown and never see, and you made a beautiful picture out of it.” He continued, “I think part of what
painting does is to allow you to mindfully put things on the back burner and relax and think clearly about new situations. I really am proud of you, Babe.”

“You have been a great support to me through this process, Gary,” I told him. “I really am happy with where we are right now.”

Later, Gary asked Brett, “Brett, do you notice any difference in Mom?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s a lot less stressed since she started this mindfulness stuff. Makes my life a lot better too.”
CHAPTER SIX
VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA:
APPROACHING INTERPRETATION

I sighed and stretched my arms over my head. I looked around our room in the quaint old bed-and-breakfast inn. The deep hues of burnished wood surrounded me. I felt as if I had stepped back in time to an old English cottage. Looking out the window, I saw heavy magenta blossoms hanging from shrubs, butterflies flitting from deep blue delphiniums to bright pink ivy geraniums, and a small fountain spraying water in an arc to a small rock pool. I smiled and relaxed. Victoria was the same place my husband and I had stayed 30 years before on our honeymoon. When I had first booked this hotel 3 months prior, it was with the intent of having a great place for Laurie and me to have our final meeting together. Instead, I was spending it with someone I should have been spending more time with for the last 7 years—my husband. Gary had patiently helped me through the ups and downs of dissertation work throughout those years, and my journaling showed how much he had impacted my decisions in life and work. Our plan for the week was to retrace many of the steps we had taken those 30 years ago and relive the excitement of seeing Victoria for the first time.

It was also a chance for me to think and to take picture after picture of the flowers, shrubs, and scenery of the area. I was painting again, something I had put on the shelf for more than 15 years. I found it interesting that I picked up my painting shortly after my last meeting with Laurie, and at about the same time my life-long friend had renewed her love of painting as well. My old friend and I had both remarked that while we were growing up, our parents had pushed us to take math and science classes and forget art—it wouldn’t get you a paying job.
The morning sunshine radiated warmth into the room. Gary had walked to the information center to get some maps, and I had some time to just sit and think. I moved outside to the tree- and flower-lined patio, bringing an aromatic cup of coffee with me, while listening to the fountain water dripping on the rocks. A butterfly landed on the table in front of me and I watched it slowly opening and closing its iridescent orange and black wings.

**Circling Back on Prior Experiences**

It had been 4 months since I had last met with Laurie, and as I had reviewed my journaling, the notes and discussions with her, and the transcripts from interviews with other participants in this study over those months, I began to get a better understanding of the things I had learned. It was interesting to read and think back on my struggles to understand mindfulness, its definitions, and its presence in my life.

Langer (2005) observed, “In the perspective of every person lies a lens through which we may better understand ourselves” (p. 131). My change in perspective reminded me of my latest visit to my optometrist. I had used the same optometrist for more than 30 years and was quite nervous when I had to work with someone new, due to my distance from my previous doctor. I explained to my new optometrist how much I had revered my other optometrist and that I was nervous. He guaranteed his work and even went so far as to say that if I was not completely satisfied I would not have to pay for the glasses. The first thing he did, after giving me a thorough eye exam and looking at the prescription I was using, was to tell me the glasses that were prescribed were not the correct ones for my vision problems. I winced because I didn’t have the trust built up with this doctor, and I was having a hard time hearing that my last optometrist could do something wrong. But I knew the gentleman had given me a guarantee, and I really felt that I didn’t have any choice but to get the new prescription. It came as a total shock.
to me when, after the optometrist had placed the new set of glasses on my nose and adjusted the ear pieces, I looked up and found I could see more clearly than I had in 10 years. How could I have not known that my vision was so compromised and think I was seeing as well as I could? I was absolutely amazed.

And so it has been with this journey on my dissertation. I would never have guessed it would be so personal, so emotional, and so enlightening. I felt as if I had put on a new pair of glasses and was seeing the world in a different light. I tried to think back on how the transformation had taken place, but couldn’t quite pinpoint any particular moment, as I did when I picked up my new pair of glasses, when I could see more clearly.

Ellen Langer’s book *On Becoming an Artist* (2005) probably helped me interpret my data and my thoughts more than any book I had read through this research process. She wrote,

Mindfulness, and its counterpart, mindlessness, are states of mind that I’ve studied and written about for many years, and I know how potent a force mindfulness can be. As important, I know that people can remake their ways of thinking to be more mindful. In my experience, each of us has the potential for a renaissance, an age defined by a creative, purposeful, and engaged life. It doesn’t matter whether the creative work we choose is painting, dance, fiction, poetry or music. What matters is pursuing it mindfully. How do we get from beginning some new activity to a personal renaissance? Learning what things stand in the way of our comfortably engaging in some leisure activity, and how to break down these roadblocks as we experience them provides the practice we need to deal with our more familiar stresses and fears. Once examined through this new lens, many of our “problems” fall by the roadside. We can, it turns out, pursue art for art’s sake and art for life’s sake, and it matters little what that art is. Any creative activity can have a powerful effect on our lives if we pursue it mindfully and recognize the ways in which old familiar fears and habits can be set aside to make room for the personal renaissance we seek. (p. 7).
Had it been a renaissance for me? I thought so. As I looked back on subtle changes I had made in my day-to-day activities, I noticed my journal entries focused less on the work at hand and more on the ways I found relaxing activities to do. I wrote about the next painting I was going to paint and about the color of the leaves on the fuchsia hanging outside of the window. I noticed the little details more each day, and the words *stress* and *overwhelmed* were not as prevalent as they were in my earlier journal entries.

**Evolution of Thought and Actions**

As I reread some of those early journal entries from a year before, these troublesome passages stuck out:

*But all it is all around is that feeling of having to live up to expectations and having to be perfect. That’s probably my biggest stressor. I want to do a good job—I want to be known for my leadership style and qualities and at the same time I want to lead a balanced life. Is this possible?*

*I wake up sweating. I’ve had another vivid dream. The setting is in the gymnasium at the high school. I am in a board meeting with the board facing the bleachers right up close. I start the meeting and ask all to stand for the pledge of allegiance. Instead they burst out into song—I don’t even remember what the song was. I look down and my agenda has changed. The board chairman has scripted out an entirely new meeting agenda and expects me to follow it word for word. I have difficulty because some of the script font is printed backward and I have to decipher it as I talk, so it sounds like I can’t read. Someone asks a question and it isn’t on the script. I respond to the person in the audience and she says you didn’t even call me by the right name. I continue with this horrid meeting, where after I finish the pre-made script the board and the audience begin to critique my job by saying things like yes she didn’t follow the script very well. We will have a talk with her in private. When I wake up it feels so real. I just remember in the dream I was so afraid of disappointing both the board and the audience but feeling as though I had to wade through the dangerous script.*
Was I so naïve to think that things would be better in a new district... work easier in a new district? What I am finding out is that the job is hard no matter what district you are in. This is the life of the superintendent—I am a counselor, I am a mediator, I am a negotiator, and I am overworked. It doesn’t change no matter where I go. The harsh reality...

Dr. Gates, in his own way, let me open the padlock gate and let all the Mustangs run loose. I start the conversation and just spill out my frustrations to him about mindfulness in practice. Why am I doing this? I don’t think I can do this.

I get up in the morning, grab something out of the fridge to eat, often not even remembering later on what it was I ate. I drive to work on autopilot and am surprised when I end up in the District parking lot.

A few months later, I notice subtle changes in what I have written. The words don’t seem as harsh, and it seems as if change is possible and as if mindfulness practices may be affecting my daily routines.

This morning I actually noticed when I heard leaves blowing across the asphalt parking lot and that it reminded me of fall.

Today was making the familiar strange. We are going over the Bridge of the Gods and I am looking at it with new eyes, even though I have driven over it many times since moving here.

I think I am becoming more like a thermostat than a thermometer. By me changing temperatures all of the time it is way too stressful. I am trying to keep my emotional thermostat at a certain temperature and not let myself get too bummed out with the lows and vice versa not get too high when it all goes positive because I know the next day something will happen that will bring me back down to earth.

I try to be mindful of all of the conversations I have this day... I watch the body language of the new superintendents and try to imagine their stresses and what is going on in their heads. It seems most of them are overwhelmed with the enormity and gravity of the job.
I took Thursday and Friday off to go to a friend’s father’s funeral. It was really nice to be with family and friends and I decided that once I got there I wasn’t going to think about work at all. And I was able to do that. That’s pretty amazing for me!

Langer (2005) asserted,

A personal renaissance is an internal life that’s not cut off from the external world; instead, the external is food for our internal lives. Once we’ve achieved a personal renaissance, we enjoy the excitement as though everything is at stake but we have the awareness that nothing is. (p. 66)

Some of my later journal entries show some of the most obvious change. I was taking time to meditate and exercise more, and to actually talk to people and listen carefully to conversations. I was not having the nightmares and waking up to write down what I’d dreamt. I was internalizing mindfulness practices by noticing the novelty and change around me daily.

When we were walking a few weeks ago I met a lady named Claire who told me she just celebrated her 90th birthday about three months ago. She was on a lengthy walk and easily kept up with me as we walked around the community park and fairgrounds. She talked about her life and how she was one of the first female sheriffs in the State of Washington. This small diminutive woman who I would have never guessed had such a difficult position had an inner strength that was very evident in talking to her. She explained the way to stay young was to stay active both in mind and in body. Her style, her grace, and her determination inspired me to set the course to be like her.

I had a good dream. It was about our district and how OSPI (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction) sent a team down to congratulate us on impacts we were making with increased student achievement. I had all of the principals out in front taking the banner. When I woke up, I felt energized and happy.

I don’t punish myself as much in my journaling anymore. I am trying to wake up each morning and thank my body for getting me from place to place. I feel like I am who I am and I can be okay with the good and happy parts and also with my shortcomings and sad parts.
One of my last journal entries talked about a celebration at the end of the year.

*What an unbelievable day. Today was the last day of school and I planned a time to thank staff for all the work they did over the year. The board and I planned a luncheon and a small ceremony to have each board member thank their adopted school building’s staff members. We had a great luncheon and thanked all of the staff. I was surprised when the president of the teachers’ union came forward and requested to speak. He then proceeded to tell the audience that he had worked at the district for over twenty years and worked for three other superintendents and I was the best superintendent he had worked for. He proceeded to say that I was transparent, open, honest, and there for the employees. He shared that when he talks to me he knows I am there for the staff and care about them. He then handed me a large gift certificate for a local retreat center and the entire audience rose to give me a standing ovation. While people were standing and clapping, the school board president leaned over and said I don’t want to steal Brian’s thunder but the board feels the same way. I had a difficult time keeping my composure.*

I had a good relationship all year with the unions of the four different bargaining groups. It had taken a lot longer in my previous district–4 years to gain the total support of the teacher’s union, for them to appreciate, trust, and respect me. I wondered whether the change might have been from the way I approached people due to my mindfulness studies. My last journal sentence was, Wow. *Something has changed . . . I think it is me.*

**Mindfulness Can Be Easy, the Journey Difficult**

This journey to be more mindful has been difficult. I thought back on the last time I’d met with Laurie and how I had poured out my feelings of grief about having pushed in my life for so long and having finally realized that there was more to life than working all of the time. In looking back and rereading my journaling and my transcribed conversations, I came to believe the grief was for time lost–time that I could have spent really noticing the world around me.
Langer (2005) wrote about the phenomenon that many people call a midlife crisis. She explained,

At some point in life, many people come to realize that nothing has intrinsic meaning. There are three responses to this moment. Those who do not successfully emerge from this belief stay depressed and cynical at the meaninglessness of it all. Some ignore this belief and proceed as if they never had it, although all the while it lurks in the background. Finally, there are those who accept that everything is equally meaningless or meaningful. This last group is the most likely to stay situated in a self-constructed, meaningful present—a personal renaissance. (p. 69)

Was I having a mid-life crisis? I didn’t know. What I did know is that completing the dissertation work allowed me to work through and analyze the issues surrounding my work and the stresses I was holding in as a female superintendent. I accepted the uncertainty of life, and that acceptance gave me the freedom to discover new meaning. Part of the stress I took on seemed related to my belief that work defined my worth. Wolcott (1994) noted that it is difficult for those of us reared under a strict ethos of the propriety of work and who in turn subscribed to that ethos in the ordering of our own lives, to fathom that all individuals capable of doing so would not choose either to work or at least occupy themselves with some moral equivalent of it. He suggested we need to “recognize our own deep-seated and unexamined assumptions regarding the inviolability of work” (p. 246).

I had developed a devotion to work that took over the rest of my life. It wasn’t until this autoethnographic work had slapped that unhealthy devotion to work right in my face, that I realized I had taken only a few days of vacation in the entire time I had been a superintendent. Since that time, I have used almost every vacation day I had allotted to me, finding that I came back refreshed and with more energy than I had before I left. I also found the meaning in daily vacations, by taking the valuable time to discuss things other than my work with my husband.
Instead of my work, we talked about his work with a 3rd grade student with severe behavior challenges, or we discussed how we would put our small pontoon boats on the top of the car for our next adventure. We enjoyed the more frequent walks with our dogs, I enjoyed food mindfully and no longer viewed it as the arch enemy, and I became mindfully creative by starting up my painting once again.

Carroll (2007) wrote the book *The Mindful Leader*. He explained how mindful leaders come to a realization:

As mindful leaders, we are not interested in improving ourselves or becoming happier; rather we are interested in being who we already are—we are interested in discovering our basic sanity. In mindfulness meditation, we are working to perfect what is traditionally called the effort of “nonachievement,” in which we finally become comfortable with who we are rather than anxiously trying to become someone else. It is a profound sense of ultimate honesty in which we are willing to finally rest with whatever we are experiencing, and such ease is the very foundation of genuine leadership. (pp. 56-57)

For some reason, it was easier for me to recognize Carroll’s admonishment after the year of mindfulness practice and journaling. I felt I was becoming comfortable with who I was, and from the comments of the administrators, with whom I worked with almost daily, it seemed I had made progress and was more open and mindful.

**Reflections on Mindfulness and Work**

When I reflected back on my work year, I noticed how my perceptions of events changed. Just like in Magic Eye puzzles where if you stare at it long enough a picture appears, I noticed a picture of the effects of mindfulness in practice that appeared over the year. Examples ranged from dealing with difficult conversations and people; changing from blaming to understanding;
finding that ‘mindful engagement not only increases liking for words and objects, but it also increases liking for people’ (Langer, 1997 p. 64); and finally learning to be more flexible.

There were many difficult conversations I had over the year and how I dealt with those really focused on understanding. I worked to understand there might be suffering on the other person’s part who I spoke with; and it was not productive to blame others. Hanh (1991) wrote,

We can also meditate on the suffering of those who cause us to suffer. Anyone who has made us suffer is undoubtedly suffering too. We only need to follow our breathing and look deeply, and naturally we will see his suffering. Once we understand the reasons our bitterness towards him will vanish, and we will long for him to suffer less. (p. 83)

I recognized that when I had problems with co-workers, community members, or family my first instinct before I began studying mindfulness was to blame others. I found out that blaming had no positive effect at all, and it was far easier to mutually solve a situation by trying to understand why someone had particular thoughts or feelings.

I also noticed how important my fellow superintendents were in helping me as mentors and friends. I knew that research on the value of mentors for female superintendents’ success was abundant (Boone-Wooten, 2003; Brunner, 2000; Chapman, 1997; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Kwesiga & Bell, 2004; Martin, 1990; Postlewait, 1990; Sharratt & Derrington, 1993; Stewart & Gudykunst, 1982; Tavakolian, 1993; Walder, 2000). Mentorship is an ancient concept originally traced to Homer’s epic, The Odyssey, when Ulysses chose his wise and trusted old friend, Mentor, to guard and guide his son, Telemachus. Informal mentorships, as the one described in Greek mythology, were considered an integral part of an individual’s growth and development.

There have been several different studies concerning women and the influence of mentors. Walder (2000) conducted a study to identify and examine factors which have influenced female
aspirants to attain the position of superintendent in the state of Arizona and better understand why women are under-represented. After using a qualitative method to interview women superintendents, Walder stated that 53.8% of the subjects mentioned that having a mentor influenced them in wanting to become a superintendent. Most subjects reported feeling they had been mentored by someone whom they admired, such as a supervisor, close friend, or spouse. In the conclusion of the study, one of the recommendations included having women aspirants find a mentor or role model. Another recommendation was that women aspirants should willingly mentor other qualified and credentialed males and females.

A large quantitative study by Stewart and Gudykunst (1982) had similar conclusions. This study was conducted, utilizing a sample survey research design, in a moderately sized nationwide financial institution in the Northeast. Employees were chosen using a stratified random sampling technique, yielding a total of 404 respondents. Mentoring, or the perceived importance of a friend’s assistance in helping the person advance was almost three times larger for females (.834) as it was for males (.298).

In Washington State, Sharratt and Derrington (1993) surveyed 200 female subscribers to the WASA professional job listing service. This subscriber list consisted of superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, coordinators, principals, and others within the administrative structure. Respondents completed a discrepancy model questionnaire regarding the “barriers” they believe exist that keep them from securing a superintendency. In a rank ordering of the four barrier statements identified as significant (p.< .05) for females in securing a superintendent’s position the results were: sex role stereotyping, sex discrimination, availability of appropriate female role models, and availability of sponsorship or mentorship.
Sharratt and Derrington (1993) suggested that school districts, professional associations, and higher education and state policy makers all share responsibility for mentoring. Possible mentoring strategies given included requiring that all new administrators have a mentor, that mentors be trained, and that current administrators be encouraged to become mentors.

Boone-Wooten (2003) found that the importance of mentors and sponsors cannot be underestimated. Out of 541 superintendents, 53 were women and 11 were asked to participate as a purposeful qualitative sample. Boone-Wooten found that women who achieve success in administration are the ones who have role models and support systems. Several superintendents who were a part of the Seattle-area cadre of women administrators in the study reported their belief that “if women educators are to increase their representation at the top levels of their profession, they must have help from those who have gone before.”

What I learned from my mentors and friends was that as I became more mindful, and really was in the moment as I talked and shared, our experiences became deeper and richer. Early in my career as a superintendent I had several mentors who were very helpful. What I noticed now was that I had developed relationships that were higher in quality, relationships with a sharpened focus that were reciprocal in nature. Further research is warranted on the importance of mindfulness in mentorships.

Joel and Jane noticed a difference as well. When I last talked to Joel, I asked him, “Joel have you noticed anything different this year as I have studied mindfulness?”

“Are you kidding?” Joel exclaimed. “You really listen to me now. When I call I know it won’t be a one-sided conversation. I look to you for advice and you really encourage me to look at new and novel concepts as I try to figure out a situation. Whatever you have done has really impacted how we relate to each other. I have always enjoyed talking to you, but I really feel like
you have a wisdom and quietness that I want to gain. And you know, Teena, now you really think of others. You encourage me, and I appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“That means a lot to me, Joel,” I told him. “I know you have had some tough situations with dealing with budget and personnel this year, and I appreciate your taking the time to listen to me.”

It was the comment from Jane that made me recognize I had changed. She said, “You know, Teena, I really enjoy talking to you. You seem to have time for me now, and I feel like we have really grown close this year. Your attitude is infective and I seem to smile when we talk.” She thanked me for sending her flowers, which I had done when I heard she was dealing with her husband’s illness and had dealt with a bomb scare/evacuation at the same time at her high school.

Finally, I gained capacity for more flexible thinking and actions. I was able to take action to address concerns without becoming mired in worries about consequences or despair over failed expectations. We were able to work together as a staff, board, and community to close a school building in a short 6-month period. Because I didn’t have preconceived ideas, I was able to give multiple options for the board and community to consider. We used an outside group to conduct a management review, and we used their recommendations to springboard our decision-making. I encouraged the expression of diverse opinions, and even though the final grade span configuration was different from what I’d initially wanted, I was able to look at the bigger picture and hear all voices to help the board make an informed decision, one that had been eluding the district for the previous 11 years as they struggled with too many buildings and declining enrollment. I had a parent send me a letter to send out to parents if I chose. This was after we had made the decision and had developed a parent/staff transition committee to help us make the transition as smooth as possible. She wrote:
I feel that the Georgetown administration has worked very hard to ensure a smooth and successful transition of James Middle School to the Georgetown High School building. The formation of the Transition Advisory Committee shows the depth of the administration’s concern that all potential aspects and impacts of this move are addressed. As a parent, my initial reaction to the closing of the middle school was that it would be better to move the 7th and 8th graders to Indian Canyon Elementary because of the potential influence of the older high school students on the younger middle schoolers. However, after taking the time to read the analysis provided by the school district along with the parent survey, I changed my mind based on the potential academic benefits of combining James Middle School and GHS. But my concerns for student safety remained.

As a member of the Transition Advisory Committee, I have been very pleased to find that not only concerns for student safety, but school identity, the building of community, and the feelings of students have been key issues for the administration in this transition, in addition to the heavy task of moving and combining academic space and materials. If, as a parent or community member, you think that this transition has been viewed simply as a budget-cutting measure, I assure you that it has not. The administration had already thought of many potential issues concerning students in both schools right from the first meeting. Then, they listened to concerns presented by parents, students, and school staff who were on the committee, and addressed all our concerns as thoroughly as possible. The students on the committee were asked their opinion or what they had been hearing from their peers about the transition. These discussions led to spending more time addressing the transition with students at both schools.

The point of this committee was to try to find the angles that weren’t considered and I believe we’ve succeeded at that. I won’t pretend that this will be an easy transition, particularly for staff and current students at the middle school and high school. There are bound to be a few issues that we either didn’t come up with, or that will present themselves upon the start of the school year in fall. But my experience with the Advisory Committee makes me confident that this administration will try to deal with any problems that arise in a fair and sensitive manner. To parents who are upset and worried about this transition, please rest assured that every effort is being made by these hard-working teachers, staff, principals, and the superintendent to educate and take care of the needs of
your children at school. You can’t please everyone, and no matter how successful this transition, there will still be those who feel this is the worst possible solution to a difficult budget problem. But as an initially skeptical parent, I now feel confident that when my child enters the middle school in 2 years, she will be entering an environment where every effort has been made to ensure the best for her—both educationally and for her growth as a person.

I have come to understand that because I became more flexible in my thinking, and more open to multiple options, this transition proceeded smoothly.

Langer (1997) noted,

Although flexible thinking is the essence of mindfulness, flexibility can also be considered a quality of intelligent thinking. We all have a repertoire of lower-level procedures and higher-level strategies that may be tried in novel settings. The larger our repertoire and the less we are attached to any specific procedure or strategy, the more flexible our thinking is likely to be. From a mindful perspective, one’s response to a particular situation is not an attempt to make the best choice from among available options but to create options. (pp. 113-114)

Through providing options and looking at each situation with rejuvenated meaning, I was able to not let my personal opinions jade a decision that was for the better good of the district.

I was also able to change my attitude in relationship to the work I was doing. Langer (1997) observed,

Virtually any task can be made pleasurable if we approach it with a different attitude. If we have long held the mindset that a particular activity is arduous, changing to a mindful attitude may be difficult, but the difficulty stems from the mindset and not the activity. (p. 61)

I began to enjoy my work more, and I didn’t view challenges as drudgery or punishment for choosing my profession as a superintendent. At the end of the school year, I received a letter
from a teacher who was leaving the district. She had come to me about a month prior in a quandary. She loved teaching in our district, but lived in a neighboring town. That town’s elementary school had an open position. She had three young children and she told me about the challenges of day care and how the last time all of her kids had stomach flu and she had kids throwing up in the car as she transported them from home to the daycare in our district. I told her that her family was what is most important and that I supported her decision to try to get a job closer to her home, where she could get in-home day care. After learning that she was the successful candidate for the teaching position and had decided to accept it, she wrote the following:

Dear Teena, Thank you for attending our staff party tonight. It meant so much to me to have you take time out of your busy schedule to wish me well. Additionally, your kind words really touched me. Thank you for lifting me up with your kindness.

One of the things that drew me to you on our tour of Indian Canyon was your genuine interest in the staff and students. I was overjoyed when you accepted the superintendent position because I loved the way you questioned and sought out information. I appreciate the way you seek out the positive and celebrate staff and student accomplishments. I also admire the way you face challenges and succeed in moving everyone towards a goal. Finally, I am impressed with your deep understanding of what kids should learn and be able to do. I was blown away by the email you sent following our student book chat presentations. I could feel your appreciation as you named the many standards covered in the project. I shared your e-mail with our third graders and their little chests swelled with pride.

Thank you for all you are doing to lead this District in the right direction. I love this place and will continue to cheer your success. With great admiration, S.

I also enjoyed the work on my dissertation. Joel told me, as I was explaining my final results and dissertation, that I had fired him with enthusiasm to go back and finish his doctorate work. Since that time, Joel has contacted the university and made plans to return to his study.
Gordon and I had continuing, almost weekly dialogue as I sent him chapters to read and critique and as I worked to understand all I had learned over the last year.

**The Continuing Challenges**

I still faced challenges in my role as a superintendent. The work load didn’t change, and the pressures were still there. I still had concern for my husband’s health and my son’s entry into the Navy, but felt I had the tools to look at the challenges objectively. I now considered my work and my life like a river, where sometimes it was calm and so peaceful you could see your reflection on the surface of the water and you could watch the water slowly dripping off the paddles. Sometimes, however, there were deep rapids, jarring me to the right and left, forcing me to dip down into the water and to come back upright with some effort. Now, however, instead of worrying before I came to the rough water, I looked forward to the challenge. If I made a mistake and headed in the wrong direction, I would wait until the water calmed and reset my compass. I didn’t create my own stressors by imagining the worst. I just waited out the rough water without judgment. My abilities to cope with stress by using mindfulness were making a difference. I also came to recognize I was not in rough water alone. When I needed assistance, my fellow superintendents were there to help.

And I continued to paint. I agreed with Langer (2005), who explained:

Painting taught me not just to be tolerant of myself when I make mistakes but actually welcome them. Mistakes provide the opportunity to be mindful. When, by choice or by necessity, we find ourselves in the present, the details of the present can tell us what to do. (p. 98)

Hanh (1991) wrote of art as an integral part of creating mindfulness. He described how art can take on many forms:
When we do not trouble ourselves about whether or not something is a work of art, if we just act in each moment with composure and mindfulness, each minute of our life is a work of art. Even when we are not painting or writing, we are still creating. We are pregnant with beauty, joy, and peace, and we are making life more beautiful for many people. Sometimes it is better not to talk about art by using the word “art.” If we just act with awareness and integrity, our art will flower, and we don’t have to talk about it at all. When we know how to be peace, we find that art is a wonderful way to share our peacefulness. Artistic expression will take place in one way or another, but the being is essential. So we must go back to ourselves, and when we have joy and peace in ourselves, our creations of art will be quite natural, and they will serve the world in a positive way.

That made sense to me; but pieces of the puzzle were still missing. I would still wrestle with why, if mindfulness theory shows so many potential benefits for individuals and organizations, it so easy to forget and not be mindful. I would question how I would be able to authentically engage my principals with mindfulness activities and have them not feel guilty for taking the time to do so. I would continue to wonder about how to keep myself from paying attention only to life’s big decisions and teach myself to pay attention to the smaller choices that I would sometimes mindlessly make, even in light of the changes I had made through the year.

As I questioned myself about those continued challenges, I hearkened back to my time with Laurie, when I watched her quietly look up to me and say, “You are in exactly the right place.”

She was right.

I was brought out of deep thought by my husband bounding up the steps next to me. “I’ve got all the maps!” he called. “Are you ready to go on our next adventure?”

“Yes, dear,” I pledged. “I am ready to go!”
SUMMARY

Since the 1990s, the study of mindfulness has spread from its initial use in the United States by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the area of medicine to many other fields. Mindfulness practices now are in nascent stages of use by education professionals. School superintendents are, by the very nature of their position, the most likely individuals to help themselves, their staff, and students to embrace mindfulness education. There is a rationale for looking at this approach, there is burgeoning research on benefits of mindfulness education, and there are many programs available that can be used by superintendents, their staff members, and their students. Being in this fast-paced world of school reform offers remarkable opportunities as well as difficult challenges. By incorporating a way to be less stressed and being able to stay in the moment, educators may be better able to overcome those difficult challenges and develop a more highly reliable organization.

Rationale

Sternberg (2001) stated that the stress of being a school superintendent is probably unavoidable because of the nature of the job; however, the way superintendents handle their own lives can reduce the long-term effects of stress. Teachers also report high levels of stress (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

Mindfulness may be a tool education professionals can use to relieve stress and become healthier individuals. Sternberg (2001), Gmetch (2006), and Hinkley (2001) all encouraged superintendents to close out the world for 15-20 minutes a day and use techniques such as yoga, meditation, or prayer, all of which are mindful behaviors and actions. Yet Hawk and Martin (2011), in their recent article on understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency, found that relaxing with mindfulness was one of the least utilized coping mechanisms used by
superintendents, although it was noted to be the second most effective coping strategy, behind only exercising. Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, and Karayolas (2008) noted that for teachers as well, the empirical research addressing potential solutions to work-related stress and burnout is sparse.

Professionals interested in this approach may choose to read *A Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook*, written by Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein (2011). This workbook gives practical ways for busy professionals to practice becoming mindful in everyday settings. Many larger metropolitan cities offer 8-week MBSR workshops. A person only needs to type in “mindfulness stress based reduction” into an Internet search engine and a plethora of sources will appear. Several studies (Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Reibel et al., 2011) show evidence that MBSR reduces anxiety and stress.

*Peace Is Every Step* (1991) by Thich Nhat Hanh is also a delightful guidebook for a personal mindfulness journey. The Dalai Lama wrote this in the foreword:

> Thich Nhat Hanh begins by teaching mindfulness of breathing and awareness of the small acts of our daily lives, then shows us how to use the benefits of mindfulness and concentration to transform and heal difficult psychological states. Finally he shows us the connection between personal, inner peace and peace on Earth. This is a very worthwhile book. It can change individual lives and the life of our society. (p. 8)

**Additional Benefits to Educators**

At a recent principals’ and superintendents’ conference I spent time looking at the selection of books on sale by vendors. There were no fewer than 10 books that related to being mindful leaders, using mindfulness in the classroom, and mindfulness practice guides. Kristen Olson (2012), an instructional coach and author of *Wounded by School*, reported with her co-
Mindfulness goes deeper than simply generating feelings of relaxation and calm or developing a toolbox of techniques. It is an embodied practice that creates an inner balance that promotes emotional stability and clarity. It allows us to act and respond with increased understanding. This practice builds tolerance and resilience under stress. (para. 5)

Mindfulness offers many benefits in addition to stress reduction. Mindfulness studies results point to a possible solution to the gender role conflict faced by female leaders (Kawakami, White, & Langer, 2000). When they are mindful, women leaders are perceived as being genuine, thus escaping the paradox of being subjected to incompatible expectations regarding leadership roles and the female gender role (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1992). In Kawakami et al.’s (2000) study, they examined the effect of leader mindfulness on perceptions of female leadership. As they predicted, men who viewed a speech given by either a mindful or mindless female leader rated the mindful leader higher on leadership (p. 56).

For a professional in an organization, practicing mindfulness can also result in an increase in competence and ethical behavior (Thomas et al., 2004), as well as an increase in memory, creativity, and positive affect (Langer, 2000). Dhiman (2009) noted that mindfulness has tremendous potential for enhancing workplace well-being through improved communications, efficient meetings, optimum performances, better decisions, and greater understanding (p. 50). Brody and Coulter (2002), in their article about preparing business school graduates for the 21st century workplace, noted that mindfulness helps individuals process and make better use of information outside of contexts in which it was initially learned. They agreed that a mindfulness-based approach would prove beneficial in all areas of business and education.
Finally, several management studies (Fiol & O’Connor, 2003; van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005; Vogus & Welbourne, 2003; Weick et al., 1999) indicate that mindfulness can be used in organizations to reduce error and improve performance.

Langer (2000) advocated for more education professionals to explore and address reducing mindlessness in learning. Studies (Anglin et al., 2008; Carson et al., 2001; Orr, 2002; Singh et al., 2010) indicated that by mindfully noticing new things, attention improves and gender effects are diminished. Mindful attention results in curiosity, greater liking of the task, and improved memory (Langer, 2000; Ying, 2009). Mindfulness also helps prevent automatic stereotype-activated behavior (Djikic, Langer, & Stapleton, 2008). Gates (2005) even went so far as to observe,

Buddhist philosophy reveals the importance of a non-reform approach to school community—for there is nothing to obtain, nowhere to go, no answers–just experience in all of its fullness. And such non-reform might be significant to bringing about the transformation of education sought by current reforms. (p. 170)

Given that research on mindfulness and mindfulness training has proliferated in fields other than education since the mid 1980s, further research in the education arena is much needed and justifiable.

Finally, mindfulness can help in an individual’s personal life as well. Burpee and Langer (2005) found there is a strong relationship between mindfulness and marital satisfaction, noting, “Spouses who are mentally engaged, open to new experiences, and aware of new contexts enjoy more satisfying and fulfilling marital relationships” (p. 50).

Kabat-Zinn (2003) encouraged us to develop mindfulness, writing,

I would add only that it (mindfulness) is perhaps a sane way to live that may not be so strange once one begins to inhabit that landscape in a more regular way. Perhaps it is
only strange in a society that persists in devaluing the present moment in favor of perpetual distraction, self-absorption, and addiction to a feeling of “progress.” (p. 148)

Finally, as educators wanting to do what is best for our schools and our students, we may need the welcome respite mindfulness provides. Michael Carroll (2004) reminded us,

Our fast paced society offers remarkable opportunities as well as difficult challenges and paradoxes. Whether running a business, pursuing an education, or mastering a profession, we have access to unprecedented resources and exciting prospects. Yet too often we can find ourselves feeling harried, distressed, and, at times, out of touch with our experience. Rather than learning, we find ourselves “cramping”; instead of savoring, we end up “gulping.” Rather than managing, we “hurry towards success.” And, too often, rather than living our lives fully, we can often find ourselves rushing past the very things we cherish the most.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Participant Observation/Interview Consent Form

Date, 2012

<<NAME>>
<<TITLE>>
<<ADDRESS>>
<<CITY>>, <<STATE>>, <<ZIP>>

Hello,

My name is Teena McDonald of the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology at Washington State University. I am a doctoral student studying using mindfulness to reduce stress as a female superintendent. As part of my research project, I am interviewing fellow experienced female superintendents new to their district.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Washington State University. I am requesting your permission to observe and interview you about your job as a female superintendent. The interview should not take more than an hour to conduct. Follow-up interviewing may occur. The interview will be digitally voice recorded. Following the interview, the recording will be transcribed and then the electronic data will be erased. Your identity will remain confidential. You will not be identified, nor will your comments be connected to you, in this study. You may freely withdraw from this study at anytime.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about the project at any time. I can be reached at 360-991-6798 or mcdonaldt@scsd.k12.wa.us. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant you may contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661.

_______________________                                ___________________
Participant's Name                                Date

_______________________                                ___________________
Researcher                                Date
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Women Superintendents Interview Guide

1. Tell me about yourself and your district.

2. Could you share with me why you became a superintendent?

3. What are some of the major issues you’re having to deal with in your district?

4. How do you work with your administrative team?

5. Any first impressions about you that you had to deal with, either from your parents, administrative team, or school board?

6. What have you found most valuable to building your relationship as a team?

7. What do you see as being the most important challenges facing your district that you’ve attempted to tackle?

8. What critical work do you see your team as avoiding?

9. As a administrative team or district, how are problems handled?

10. What have been some of the conflicts you’ve experienced?

11. How does your team handle conflict?

12. What is your communication like with your board and administrators?

13. Any surprises that you’ve had to deal with?

14. Talk to me a little about the things that support you in doing your job.
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

School Board Members

1. How long have you been a board member? How many new superintendents have you had since you have been on the board?

2. Can you share with me how you acquaint your new superintendents with their new district?

3. What are some of the challenges as you see it of helping superintendents “learn the ropes” of the new organization?

4. What supports do you give to new superintendents to help them learn their new organization?

5. What have been some of the challenges of helping new superintendents learn their new organization?

6. Share some of the successes you have had in helping superintendents learn their role in your district.

7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about helping superintendents learn about their new organizations or working with the board?
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Group Interview with Administrative Team

1. Can you share with me your thoughts about your first impressions when I began my discussions with you concerning mindfulness and being mindful in our practice?

2. Share with me the things that cause you the most stress.

3. Can you share how or if our discussions on having mindfulness-based practices in our personal and professional life has impacted you?

4. Can you share with me if your perceptions have changed concerning being mindful and taking some time in your day to be mindful, meditative, and/or reflective?

5. In your words, from our conversations, what does mindfulness mean to you?

6. Have you noticed throughout this year times when I have shown mindfulness? Has this impacted the work you do?

7. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about mindfulness and the workplace?