

VUCA, Mindfulness, and Beyond

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Overview

The value of mindfulness is well documented and supported by a rapidly growing body of research and neuroscience. In this paper I will write about how and why mindfulness is so important and what lies beyond it.

I. VUCA and mindfulness

The organizational world has coined the term VUCA to describe the increasingly challenging environments in which we operate. VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Almost all the senior leaders I work with worldwide are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress in these challenges, and I think the main reason for this is quite simple.

Starting in our early years of education the left-brain, rational/analytical/linear part of us is given increasing prominence until, for the great majority of executives and organizations, it becomes the predominant way of navigating the world.

As Einstein so presciently said:

“The rational mind is a faithful servant, the intuitive mind is a sacred gift. We have created a society which honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

The servant has “served” very well indeed, but in the face of VUCA our rational mind, with its inbuilt need to control and structure, feels increasingly helpless, and this is not a pleasant experience. The part of us that loves clarity and certainty prefers to make things as predictable as possible, and above all wants to feel in control. This is like living on an island in the middle of a torrential river that is bursting all its riverbanks.

So, do we flounder helplessly and painfully as we desperately try to shore up the riverbanks, or is there a new possibility, we might even say a new necessity? Might it be possible to find some kind of stillness at the center of the storm?

Approximately 2,500 years ago humans made an important discovery. We found that through paying attention in a more deliberate and practiced way, deeper states of consciousness could be awakened.

Every culture throughout recorded history has developed contemplative practices that incorporate this discovery. The inner sanctums of these traditions have always attracted only a very small minority of devotees, as worldly interests remain far more compelling. Yet, here we are in 2016 witnessing a quite unprecedented uptake of mindfulness and meditation practices, right at the heart of our business, health and education sectors. Practices that five years ago would have been considered marginal, insubstantial and quite possibly irrelevant have found their way into mainstream daily life.

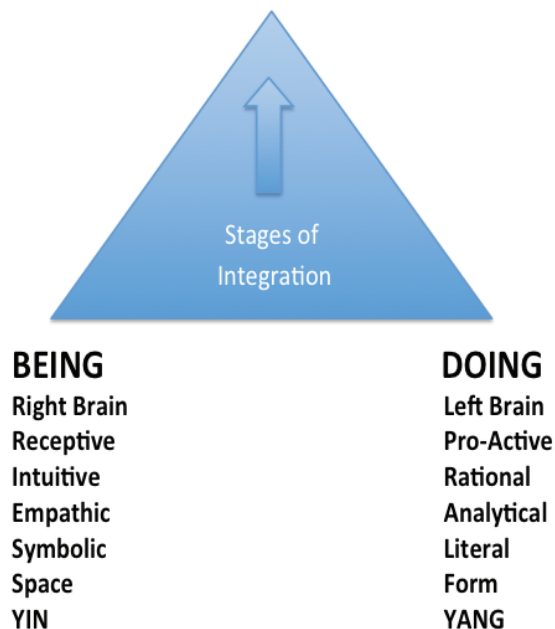
One thing is certain – the rational mind alone will never be the vehicle that takes us into a deeper stillness. This does not lie within its competency sphere. We need a bigger picture of who we are.

We have two fundamentally different yet complimentary sides or modalities within us. I call them Being and Doing. Each of these has a series of capacities and competencies.

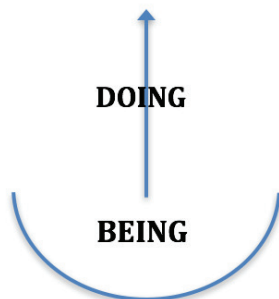
In every organizational group I work with there is clear agreement, and usually a painful groan of recognition about the fact that the Doing modality is massively dominant. As previously noted, in the VUCA world this brings terrible stress.

The next step is an acceptance that it would be much better to be able to function at the top of the triangle, in a high performing integration of the two modalities.

HIGH PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP



At the top of the triangle we find that, not only are Doing and Being no longer in an either/or scenario, but rather in something that looks like this:



That is to say – our optimum possibilities arise when *all of our Doing* comes out of an *inner base of Being*. The deepening of this possibility in every moment is a lifelong path of development towards mastery.

In *The Master and his Emissary*, his landmark book on right and left hemisphere brain function, Oxford University professor Iain McGilchrist goes so far as to say:

“The relationship between the two hemispheres does not appear to be symmetrical, in that the left hemisphere is ultimately dependent on, one might almost say parasitic on, the right, though it seems to have no awareness of this fact.”

This is exactly where the importance of mindfulness becomes apparent as we look for that stillness, that inner balance of the modalities, in the centre of the storm.

Mindfulness at its best has two vitally important effects. The first is that, through the simple and precise act of paying attention, the tyranny of the Doing modality starts to loosen its grip on us and we start to experience an interior *spaciousness*. The importance of this can hardly be overstated, for as long as we are dominated by Doing, we live in a relatively small part of ourselves, with a sense of being consumed by the world around us, and very little room to maneuver or breathe (metaphorically and literally).

The second vital effect of mindfulness is that it opens the Being side of the triangle. This happens in a fascinatingly concrete way. In one of the many research experiments reported by Iain McGilchrist a subject was temporarily placed in 100% left brain function and the right brain hemisphere shut down. At this point the subject looked at his hand and said: “whose hand is that?” This shows us that the Doing part of us *does not experience being embodied*. This is evident in any downtown gym, where you see people doing things to their body without necessarily feeling their body from the inside, even sitting on an exercise bike while responding to emails.

In the vitality of early childhood we were completely embodied, meaning that each second of life was an intensely physical experience. For many good reasons we had to reduce this intensity, and the most effective way to do this was to tense our body and restrict our breathing. These habits get embedded to the point where as adults we walk through each day with varying degrees of physical numbness. And therefore, with increasingly little access to the Being modalities of reflective thinking, intuition, and sensory and empathic connectedness.

The first and arguably most important practice of mindfulness is to bring our attention fully back into our body. As we do this over and over again, we start with a fairly basic sense of our overall posture, but then we notice more and more subtle levels of constantly changing physical sensations. It is as if our screen of awareness changes to HD, to a much higher resolution.

This, in combination with inner spaciousness, creates access to a new dimension of ourselves, and then,

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and only then we are on the developmental path of integrating Doing and Being. And the inner sensing of the body and more open breathing becomes one of the key practices that both keeps us in the zone of Doing and based in Being.

We start to walk through our days with a different kind of Presence, and all the well-documented benefits of mindfulness become more available to us – ease, calm, improved relationships, better decision-making, better sleep, and so on.

Above all, we develop a new kind of inner resilience in the face of VUCA, an egoic structure that has grown in what it can hold, and therefore in which knowing and unknowing, certainty and ambiguity co-exist much more comfortably. At best, as many people I work with report, we get far more done, in far less time, with far less effort.

II. What comes next, or “beyond the business school”

In the 1970/80s self-development movement a phrase was coined that went something like: “you have to become a somebody before you can become a nobody.”

I meet an increasing number of very successful senior executive “somebodies” who have reached an interesting and challenging threshold in their life. This is typically characterized by a falling away of meaning and motivation, and a disquieting sense of emptiness, different from the spaciousness previously referred to. A gnawing feeling that something is missing, that there is something more than being a successful somebody, even one whose ego self may have figured out a good “sense of purpose” and was leading what felt like a satisfying, successful life.

At this time in life, beautifully articulated by Carl Jung amongst others, there is a turning inward towards what we might call *soul* needs and matters of the *spirit*.

In our post-modern, rational culture many people have understandably rejected the trappings of religion precisely because of its pre-modern, magical and seemingly childish frameworks. And yet in so doing I suggest that we may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, leaving us in a spiritual wasteland, estranged from experiences of deeper connectedness, wonder and awe.

To quote Einstein again:

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

Building a larger egoic structure to deal with VUCA, and the practice of mindfulness, essential as they are, do not inherently “open our eyes,” because the very thing we have built may be exactly part of what is keeping our eyes closed. This is a sobering realization, and at this point in life new questions of a somewhat different order arise. Questions such as:

- Where is the place for the transcendent or the sacred in my life?
- What is my true gift to life?
- How do I step into a deeper unknowing?
- Where is the place of wonder in my life?
- To what am I most truly devoted?
- What happens when I open to what I have always excluded?

And crucially, given our self-centred, unyielding culture:

- Can I surrender? Can I bow to something that is greater than myself?

Our post-modern culture mostly has little time for or sensitivity to these questions, responding with anything from humour about ‘the midlife crisis’ through to medication for depression, both of which miss by a

long way the profound opportunity that this threshold brings. In my experience, business schools have little to say about it, nor do any of the numerous business books I have read about mindfulness.

This latter absence is significant because the original purpose of mindfulness practice has been largely forgotten. The original practice was designed to bring people to deeper and deeper layers of transpersonal consciousness beyond their ego. It just so happens that the practice has a multitude of other lesser yet valuable benefits, as are well noted. It is itself a reflection of the controlling mechanisms of our ego structures that the business world in particular has finally gladly embraced the lesser benefits, while somehow forgetting the much higher purpose of the practice.

In this stage a different order of work is needed. The first requirement is to create a strong enough container – almost always with the help of a mentor or coach, or in the company of a group dedicated to such matters – in which the full composition of what is happening, including all its discomfort, can be unconditionally included and felt rather than fixed or rationalized. The creation of this kind of container is deeply skilful work, and goes far beyond the realms of most corporate coaching.

Then we can address the two kinds of tensions or “pull” that are typically emerging. Both need to be welcomed and precisely discerned.

The first tension is the pull of the past. Here, as the healthy ego structure we built in order to become a “somebody” starts to soften, unintegrated parts of our early life call for attention. We meet the places in us where our fundamental needs to be received, and for nurturing and belonging, were inevitably not fully met. As we allow these places in us to be felt – a process that needs deeply skilful and sensitive guidance – we also often see how aspects of the “somebody” we built were subtly and necessarily based around the exclusion of these painful parts.

This work – which at its core is a highly attuned *emotional/energetic* rather than analytical process – can bring us to a much deeper level of vulnerability, which in turn allows our heart to melt and new sensibilities of compassion, connectedness and humility to flower.

The second tension is the pull of higher levels of consciousness. If mindfulness brought us to a first level of spaciousness, here the call of an entirely different

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level of Emptiness awaits us. Art, Nature and Silence become more and more essential gateways, as the need for any kind of rational certainty recedes further into the background.

In traditional cultures people used to recognize this new calling and retire into the forest, literally or metaphorically, for a period of contemplation of undetermined length. Undetermined, because in matters of the soul, and of spirit, our wish to be in control no longer has a place.

A burning question for me is how can we create the spaces and the cultures in which that kind of contemplation can be honoured, without having to “leave the world”? And how might an entirely new kind of leadership emerge from those spaces in which our individualistic identity melts into a larger connectedness, and a more natural sense of stewardship and service?

Put in another way – in our secular world, how might we create the equivalent of a sacred Temple space for leaders?

I am reminded of the times in my former career as a theatre director when an actor would come to me with a text and the question “I don’t know what to do with this speech.” To which my response was along the lines of “What will be much more interesting is what the speech will *do with you*.”

And indeed, when one actor or, even better, a group of actors together could surrender themselves in the way all great artists and mystics understand, time and time again something of immense, extraordinary power occurred. The rehearsal room was transformed, and the energy flowing through the group became so strong that one felt the roof might lift off. Intense emotions and vivid worlds streamed through the actors as if from nowhere, and we were all bathed in a Presence in the face of which we could only bow and feel deep gratitude and humility.

“An artist has to be ravished or there is no art ... the container has to be strong and at the same time very flexible ... true artists don’t imagine their egos created the work of art. It came through them; they were receptive.”

– Marion Woodman: “Conscious Femininity”

Keith Jarrett, one of the greatest contemporary jazz musicians expresses it thus:

I wish there were a way to make “I don’t know” a positive thing, which it isn’t in our society. We feel that we need to “know” certain things, and we substitute that quest for the actual experience of things in all its complexity. When I play pure improvisation, any kind of intellectual handles are inappropriate because they get in the way of letting the river move where it’s supposed to move.

To do an improvised concert – this includes the La Scala concert and every other time I walk on the stage and play from zero – I need to find a way to start the journey without creating the subject matter in my mind. In other words, I cannot have a melody or a motif in my head, because those things will protrude into the fabric. They will be too prominent and make the music seem like a solid object rather than a flowing process. I have to not play what’s in my ears, if there’s something in my ears. I have to find a way for my hands to start the concert without me.

And Carlos Santana, another great contemporary musician:

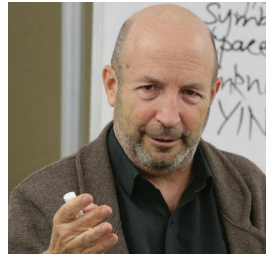
As Miles Davis would say, “you just shut up”. Tell your mind to shut up. Turn off the TV, turn off the radio, and you start hearing this blend of voices, angels, demons and all of a sudden they become one note, one voice, one melody, and you grab it. Most of the time it comes from when you’re deeply still – that’s the best music that comes.”

It has been my experience during training programmes that when an individual leader or even better a group of leaders cross this threshold from egoic identity into a more transpersonal realm, insights and connections of a completely different magnitude start to flow. The proverbial “light bulbs” start flashing with increasing intensity and we feel bathed in the presence of an emergent intelligence far greater than that of any one individual. Sometimes the room itself seems to become more luminous. Some people say it is as if we become “one mind”.

This is one of most vivid embodiments I know of what Einstein surely meant when he said that we cannot solve problems at the level of consciousness from which they were created.

In these challenging times I believe that we more than ever need leaders who are ready to step beyond their

own self-actualization and personal comfort zones into higher dimensions of consciousness, willing to become instruments of a higher evolutionary intelligence, surrendered to the service of the greater whole. ■



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