

Mindfulness in Law Schools and Legal Practice

by Kristin Glover

LAW SCHOOL LIBRARIANS are front-line witnesses to the intense hours students spend preparing for legal careers, and to the stress and anxiety students experience.¹

In partnership with the University of Virginia Mindfulness Center,² the University of Virginia School of Law's Library offers a workshop that introduces law students to mindfulness techniques for reducing stress and heightening awareness and enjoyment of the present moment. Students hone their awareness through workshop meditations, in which they practice directing their attention to their breath and body sensations, noticing when they get distracted, and then re-focusing.

"It is clear that mindfulness helps students through the stressful experience of law school," UVA workshop instructor Susanna Williams wrote in an e-mail. "It has the potential to affect their individual lawyering, and impact law by engendering a deeper justice that recognizes the connectedness of all human beings."

At Georgetown University Law Center, more than 500 students have participated in a similar program, Lawyers in Balance, in which trained Georgetown Law staff lead students in learning, practicing, and sharing about mindfulness.³ Both the University of California, Berkeley School of Law⁴ and University of Miami School of Law⁵ have offered students workshops and classes on mindfulness.

Students in UVA Law School Professor Michael Livermore's seminar on ethical values examine mindfulness as a practical tool for lawyers' professional and personal development. At the University of Richmond School of Law, Professor Shari Motro's seminar explores mindfulness' intersection with legal practice and scholarship. "Mindfulness is about authenticity," Motro wrote. "It's about being present with reality as it is rather than fighting or denying it. But being present doesn't mean we can't change; reality includes the range of ways we can work with the circum-

stances we've been given. The question is: how can I meet reality in a way that is in harmony with my deepest intentions? In my seminar, students bring this sensibility to bear on law-related questions that resonate with them, through research, writing, contemplative practice, and group discussion."

Natalie Shaw, a student in Motro's class, explained how "learning the principles of mindfulness taught me how to no longer react to situations but rather to respond. I became able to listen to my body, using tension as a tool to direct my attention where it was needed most, showing me how to clear my mind, focus, and prioritize."

Richmond-based trial attorney Aubrey Ford's daily meditation and mindful approach to interacting with clients, opposing counsel, and co-workers have transformed his law practice over the past thirty-five years. "[Mindfulness] allows me to stay in a place of equanimity, even during high-stakes depositions and hearings. I believe it enhances my relationships with clients, opposing counsel, and the court — not to mention the clear benefits to me personally."

Aubrey described mindfulness practice as a discipline that "hones the reflex of acting out of one's best intentions at any moment, even during high-stress situations. Mindfulness enhances my capacity to listen deeply to clients and other participants in the litigation process, appreciating more fully what is at the source of any communication or action."

The Richmond Contemplative Law Group, co-founded by Motro and Aubrey Ford, meets monthly to meditate and discuss mindfulness in legal practice. Contact Shari Motro, at smotro@richmond.edu, for information. The D.C. Contemplative Lawyers group also meets monthly.⁶ For books about mindfulness and its application to law, see Andrew Winston's bibliography in the April 2014 *Virginia Lawyer*.⁷

Endnotes:

- 1 See Todd David Peterson and Elizabeth Waters Peterson, *Stemming the Tide of Law Student Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn from the Science of Positive Psychology*, 9 YALE J. HEALTH POL'Y L. & ETHICS 357, 359 (2009) (summarizing studies of law students' stress and anxiety). See also Phoebe Kimmelman and Amaka Uchegbu, *Mental Health Troubles Widespread at Law School, Report Says*, YALE DAILY NEWS BLOG (Dec. 9, 2014), <http://yaledailynews.com/blog/2014/12/09/mental-health-troubles-widespread-at-law-school-report-says/>.
- 2 See The Mindfulness Center, <http://www.medicine.virginia.edu/clinical/departments/medicine/divisions/general-med/wellness/the-mindfulness-center/home.html> (last visited Apr. 29, 2015).
- 3 See Georgetown Law, Lawyers in Balance, <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/campus-life/health-wellness/lawyers-in-balance/> (last visited Apr. 29, 2015).
- 4 See Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness in Law, <http://www.law.berkeley.edu/mindfulness.htm> (last visited Apr. 29, 2015).
- 5 See Miami Law Mindfulness in Law Program, <http://www.miamimindfulness.org/> (last visited Apr. 29, 2015).
- 6 For details visit <http://dclawyersmeditation.wordpress.com>.
- 7 Andrew Winston, *A Bibliography of Resources on Mindfulness in the Law*, VA. LAW., Apr. 2014, at 55.



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