



**From:** Soren Gordhamer, *Between Four Eyes* Senior Teacher  
**Subject:** Bringing Mindfulness Practices to Rwanda  
**Date:** November 5, 2008 1:17PM  
**To:** Friends <friends@email.com>

This past month we have been traveling and teaching in Africa. We are currently in Rwanda, a small country in the heart of Africa that is likely most remembered for the 1994 genocide in which up to a million people were slaughtered in several months. We are here both to educate ourselves and to introduce people to mindfulness practices, which they have received very well. Today we held a program for college students who were orphaned by the genocide and are dealing with issues of loss, forgiveness and reconciliation. One man lost both his parents and every one of his seven siblings. We also just held a two-day workshop for the trauma counselors who work with survivors of the genocide—and who every day hear stories of brutality.

A few days ago we finished another workshop for fifty women who were widowed by the genocide. They are from a group called Avega, which offers support, including medical assistance for HIV, to women who contracted AIDS from being raped by perpetrators during the genocide. Many are also raising the children conceived from the rapes. The women in Avega were as close as any group I have ever seen. At the end of every day they sang and danced for us. There was such joy in their hearts, even as they continue to recover from enormous loss.

What these women, and Rwanda as a nation, have been asked to bear is astounding. Because there were hundreds of thousands of perpetrators in the genocide, there was not the jail space to incarcerate everyone. Likewise, the country could not move forward with so much of its workforce in jail. So they created a system similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which offers leniency for

those who admit their crimes and ask for forgiveness. This has been a very powerful and healing experience for many people. However, for the survivors it has also meant that now, for example, in the marketplace they may run across the person who killed their family.

It's clear to me that many of our workshop participants have previously tasted the value of mindfulness, though they usually do not have a language for it. As one grief counselor remarked via our translator, "I have been trying to incorporate just this kind of thing for years." Often the most powerful element they learned through mindfulness was that they did not need to know beforehand the right response to a given situation. Instead, if they could bring mindfulness to the present moment, then they would be much more likely to see the most appropriate response in that moment. This shifted the dialogue from focusing outwardly on the actions of others, such as "What about if someone says this?" or "What if someone does that?," to focusing inwardly, such as "What is the quality of my presence in a given moment?" This was very empowering.

So many of the atrocities in Rwanda were based around people's identities as "Tutsi" or "Hutu," which had been created and supported by colonists. It has been quite a lesson in the need to see through the beliefs and identities we hold of who we are and to open to and live from a deeper reality of our existence. It was seeing just this need on a trip last year to Rwanda that inspired *Between Four Eyes* founder Theo Koffler to decide to bring mindfulness practices here. It is exciting to help in a small way to move that vision forward.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** *Soren Gordhamer leads programs internationally through Between Four Eyes and is the author of the forthcoming book Wisdom 2.0 (HarperOne, 2009).*

# MINDFULNESS AMBASSADORS:

## ATTENTION TO THE WOUNDS OF CONFLICT

*Theo Koffler is the founder of Between Four Eyes, a collaborative that brings mindful awareness-based education to conflict and postconflict communities (www.betweenfoureyes.org). Koffler offers her business talents and passion for humanity to profit and not-for-profit organizations internationally. In 1979, she cofounded Super-Pharm Israel Ltd., Israel's leading drugstore chain, and she remains active in global retailing. She currently serves on the board of directors of the Hawn Foundation, is an advisor to the InnerKids Foundation, and is president of the Therapeutic Riding Center for the Disabled in Israel. Inquiring Mind editors Barbara Gates and Wes Nisker interviewed Theo Koffler in her home in Tiburon, California, on December 1, 2008.*

ADAPTED FROM AN  
INTERVIEW WITH  
THEO KOFFLER

IN 1991 DURING THE PERSIAN GULF WAR, I was living with my family in Israel. Thirty-nine Iraqi Scud missiles landed in Tel Aviv and Haifa, completely upsetting our world. For forty-three nights, I lived in a sealed bedroom with my children while my husband, an F-15 pilot, protected Israeli skies. The sound of air-raid sirens through the night and missiles exploding near my home, along with a persistent anxiety about chemical or biological warheads, became a reality that I pray never to revisit.

PHOTOGRAPHS VERONICA WILSON

The war in Israel ate at my heart. I was in a difficult place as the image I had inside me of how I really wanted to live diverged fundamentally from my reality. I felt the happiness that was nurtured in my childhood in Canada, one of the most peaceful countries in the world, slipping away. I needed to live in a place where freedom and peace were part of my day-to-day life.

Mindful awareness had come to me through my own healing journey when I was diagnosed with lupus in the fall of 1985 after the birth of my second son. On the day before giving birth, I had felt vital and healthy, able to take on life in full force; afterward, doing even the simplest of activities was emotionally and physically depleting. My life was clouded by my illness.

In my mind, my personal struggle in Israel was at the root of my condition. My busy lifestyle, pressures of work and challenges in my marriage had strained my health. I recognized that if I wanted to heal, I would need to identify ways to navigate my life from the inside rather than be at the mercy of external factors.

Since lupus was little known to the medical establishment in Israel, my journey of self-exploration and personal growth began by my reading books on alternative medicine and Buddhism. Ever so slowly I discovered that an integrative approach to wellness could give rise to new solutions; Reiki, acupuncture, homeopathy and macrobiotics became part of my blueprint for health.

In the spring of 1993, my family and I moved to Tiburon, California, where a new chapter unfolded. A quality of life that I had for many years claimed as my own resurfaced. As David Whyte reminds me, "Sometimes we have to unmake a living in order to get back to living the life we wanted for ourselves."

I started attending meditation classes at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. I learned the practice of mindful awareness and the means to notice what is happening inside. In fact, my indebtedness goes to a founding teacher at Spirit Rock, Sylvia Boorstein, who taught me vipassana and metta meditation and showed me how to hold pain with kind attention. As my contemplative practice began to flourish, the darkness lightened. An inner peace and stillness manifested, and gradually I found my way to remission.

Years later, my youngest son asked me to come to his school to teach meditation. His class was studying social issues affecting youth, and knowing the power of Buddhist practice in transforming my suffering, he thought meditation might help others. After teaching students mindfulness at Redwood High School, I realized that this was the direction I wanted to explore—following a path that was consonant with my refreshed way of being.

My thoughts turned toward our fractured world and my experiences that came from the turmoil of living in Israel. I realized that I had to *become* the peace that I wanted for the world; I had to take great risks for the sake of something greater—to be a change agent for personal and community transformation. I began to tap into a deeper sense of purpose, to find my place in what Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy calls the Great Turning, a movement that invites citizens with a longing in their hearts to take action in the world to do so despite worsening conditions.

After Diana and Jonathan Rose, the founders of the Garrison Institute, offered me the position as project advisor for their Contemplative and Education Initiative, my path became clear. Through the Garrison Institute, I encountered the scientists, educators and professionals that have shaped the field of mindful awareness, attention training and social and emotional learning. These distinguished colleagues became guides and collaborators, and slowly my calling began to reveal itself: to establish a foundation that integrates their best practices into educational workshops for conflict and postconflict communities that would otherwise remain under the radar.

Between Four Eyes was finally born in 2006 as a nonprofit organization to bring mindfulness and emotional intelligence as means for addressing issues of injustice and the promotion of peace. The foundation took its shape through an investigative journey to explore and assess field needs in Rwanda, Uganda, Israel and the Palestinian

*Continued on the following page*

## Mindfulness Ambassadors

Continued from the previous page

Territories. My research and development team included three university students who were passionate about arts and education in the recovery process. We met with a number of nongovernmental and student organizations and held interviews with key personnel to help shape our understanding of their core values, achievements and obstacles. As part of our field research we discussed key questions: How can moment-to-moment awareness help people develop a greater capacity for compassion and empathy? How can mindfulness counter destructive emotions such as hate, anger and fear? How can present-moment living help citizens move past powerful narratives that hinder personal and community growth?

It was the topic of managing emotions that really touched our audiences. In the case of conflict and genocide, both sides tend to be locked into narratives where they blame “the other,” and this paradigm obstructs the personal accountability needed to move beyond the past and to create change. Over the course of the year, we developed a body of work geared toward supporting community leaders, healthcare providers, educators and high school students in “educating the mind and heart,” self-awareness and self-care.

In October 2008 *Between Four Eyes* set sail to Africa and the Middle East for two months. We were a team of three teachers, a photojournalist, three translators and a ground coordinator in Nigeria and Rwanda. Our purpose was clear: to facilitate conversations that explored mindful awareness as a way to foster peaceful and conflict-resolving lifestyles, with authentic communication at the cornerstone of our dialogue. We

launched our workshops in Jos, Nigeria, to high school students, community leaders, educators and healthcare providers, and we presented at an international conference on global ethics. We continued to Kigali, Rwanda, and from there we moved on to Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

At the close of our first two weeks of teaching in Jos at Creative Minds International Academy, I proposed to the senior students that they become the first-ever mindfulness ambassadors in Africa: “You are the first students to bring mindfulness into educational settings, and I think we should shout about that! Let’s create a Council of Mindfulness Ambassadors, and you can be role models of mindfulness and messengers of peace in your school, in your homes and even in the larger community.” The fifteen- to seventeen-year-old students in our classes absolutely loved the idea.

We held a meeting about the practice of mindfulness with the teachers and members of the parents’ association, and we made it clear that one motivation for the council was to encourage the teachers to practice dialogue and compassionate understanding as a more effective strategy to discipline students. (In Nigeria, flogging is still the primary disciplinary method, and we wanted to address the inadequacies of this outdated practice.)

Since our departure, the mindfulness ambassadors have met once a week. The template is quite simple. *Between Four Eyes* sends electronic lesson plans to the lead teacher that include a specific theme; corresponding mindfulness skill-sets; a relevant story, poetry or wisdom quote; and a journal-writing assignment with questions for personal reflection. The council opens with a period of “quiet stillness” and a review of the

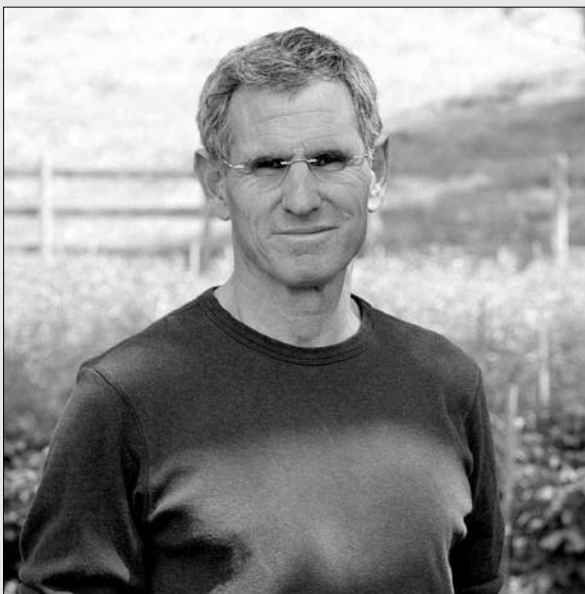
guidelines—to listen from the heart, speak without judgment and act with kindness and compassion. This is followed by a discussion of the theme of the week and student concerns of the boundaries and limitations that they encounter while adapting mindfulness to their real-life situations. To this end, we hope that the council will act as a container for their feelings and reflections and as a safe place where their voices can be heard. Amidst very little, these students long for security, community and possibility. Our message is that, regardless of conditions, there is a fertile field of awareness and kindness “between four eyes.”

Whether we are working with high school students or healthcare providers, we present ourselves as non-faith-based and without government affiliation. Our work springs out of Buddhism, but we remain secular and inclusive since our workshop participants include Muslims, Jews, Christians, Catholics and atheists. We are careful not to use language that might turn anyone against the simplicity of our message. For instance, we don’t refer to the work as “meditation,” as we are wary of the implications of this term in diverse religious settings. Instead, we talk about how inner stillness and clarity can be developed through “quiet time” and “personal reflection.” We refine meditation practices to take into consideration the flooding of memories. Some of the seemingly easy steps, like closing one’s eyes, can be very difficult for genocide survivors. As a result, we have developed an open-eyed lovingkindness meditation, adapted from Sharon Salzberg’s teachings, which has proven to be nonthreatening and very healing.

We discuss the principle of agreeing to disagree as a way to resolve conflict while allowing differences to remain intact. Conversations on this theme have

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been central to increasing awareness of how to manage destructive emotions. We also introduced the practice of cultivating gratitude as a powerful doorway for healing. In situations where trauma and psychological stress are ongoing, survivors struggle with the notion of forgiveness, especially in genocide communities, when one's neighbor or taxi driver may be the perpetrator who killed your family fourteen years ago.

As part of our method, we also integrate music, song and dance. Says Gary Diggins, musician and Between Four Eyes senior teacher, "I believe the acts of deep listening and intentional sounding invite us to be present to the moment in the same way a monk enters a deeply contemplative state of awareness. By employing user-friendly instruments such as the drum, the player is freed from the concerns of making a wrong note and simply invites exploration and spontaneity. This, to me, is the heart and soul of both music and meditation."

Regardless of where we have taught, we have been astounded by the positive feedback we have received as participants encounter the various practices. None of the communities we visited in Africa had heard of mindfulness until we introduced it to them, but they took to it right away, pronouncing it "mindfulness." This came to us in the form of a blessing, as *mind-full* seemed to celebrate the very foundation of our teaching. As a result, we have made it a practice to use the word in that way, as *mindfulness*.

So what comes next? In Africa, we have been invited to provide teacher training programs for Teachers Without Borders and graduating students from the Kigali Institute for Education. We have created educational workshops for high school students that are participating in the Peace and Unity program developed by the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, and we intend to establish Mindfulness Ambassador Councils in each of the thirty participating schools. We envision that the healthcare providers and educators who participated in our pilot workshops will continue to breathe this work, live this practice and develop deeper meaning for themselves in the context of African thought. We will return for follow-up workshops in the fall of 2009.

In Israel, we have proposed the first-ever mindfulness center at the Interdisciplinary Center, a private college that combines academic study with practical

training. In contrast to what we found in Africa, in Israel there are local, experienced mindfulness teachers who can create university-level courses. Our strategy includes teaching to NGOs and Arab and Israeli high school students in Jerusalem and Jaffa. We plan to launch more Mindfulness Ambassador Councils within the school system and disseminate our programs into as many schools as possible.

Between Four Eyes is based on the understanding that people's identities are deeply affected by cultural, political and historical circumstances. In our programs, we are committed to honoring the individual and building on each person's unique gifts and challenges. We try to convey that suffering is not the totality of one's being; that identity as a genocide survivor, a rape victim or someone living with HIV is only one aspect of who someone is; and that we can tap into our inner wisdom and explore other parts of our identity in the present moment. Through *mindfulness*, each one of us has the possibility of shifting habitual perceptions and even shifting the sense of who "I" am willing to be, distinct from who "I" was in the past.

One of the most meaningful moments for the Between Four Eyes team came at the end of a workshop for grief counselors in Rwanda. A woman named Françoise shared a vision she had while practicing "quiet time" before going to bed. She envisioned wearing a necklace with two woven baskets (handmade baskets are resonant symbols of healing for Rwandan widows). One of the baskets was red and represented the horror of the genocide; the other was green and represented the opportunity to bring forth goodness and gratitude into the world. The necklace symbolized her ability to hold both of these aspects of life. After learning about *mindfulness*, Françoise became aware that she could continue to hold and remember the genocide, and, in the present moment, she could place her intentions in the green basket—representing the peaceful world she wanted to support. ~

**ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER** Veronica Wilson is an award-winning freelance photojournalist based in the New York City area. She received her bachelor's degree in photojournalism from Syracuse University in 2007, and since then, her work has been featured in a number of media outlets, including newspapers, journals, websites and broadcast television. As a visual communicator, she aims to tell stories of the human condition that would otherwise go untold, and hopes to continue collaborating with other like-minded nonprofits.

**From:** Patrick Iregura, Between Four Eyes  
East Africa Coordinator & Translator  
**Subject:** Can Victims Be Mindful?  
**Date:** November 30, 2008 3:05PM  
**To:** Theo Koffler <info@btwn4eyes.org>

How are you dear all? I hope all is well with you and thank you in advance for reading this.

Eric [Between Four Eyes translator] and I were chatting on different things, and our discussion naturally moved to mindfulness. Somewhere along the conversation, Eric mentioned something that I found quite challenging and mind-boggling. We were looking at the benefits of being mindful even in the most difficult scenarios (because that is actually when the choice of the response is crucial and can alter the course of a lifetime). Then he mentioned a scenario that would hardly, if not impossibly, leave room for a mindful behavior or response. The example was as follows:

Let's say it's a wartime scenario where people are being killed, women raped, and kids' lives are being so horribly wasted. It looks like the only person who could have access to a mindful option is the perpetrator because he is the one committing the crime and can choose not to. But it seems scary to realize that the victim has no right whatsoever in that particular moment, including the right to be mindful—except, of course, to wish for a quicker and less painful death, which in most cases proves to be a rarity (like when, during the genocide, people would beg to pay for a bullet instead of being hacked to death. Of course, the perpetrators would take the money and still kill them horribly). So the question that Eric came up with is, Can mindfulness be applied in all circumstances, or are there instances where it is simply denied application?

I must admit I was overwhelmed by the gravity of the question. So far I have been able to understand the position of mindfulness in the post-traumatic and postconflict environment, where it can be one of the most important tools in dealing with the consequences and managing related heavy emotions. But it hasn't come to me to think of its position during the exact moment of the crime, especially on the side of the victim.

However as we carefully analyzed this issue, it actually crossed my mind at that point that if humanity could reach a level of understanding that mindfulness is the way to live, then we wouldn't have these horrible scenarios in the first place. This makes the work of B4E even more relevant to the evolution and survival of humankind.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** Rwandan Patrick Iregura, 29, survived childhood exile in the Congo and the genocide that decimated his family in 1994. He has taken every opportunity to move forward in life and graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and education from the Kigali Institute of Education. Dedicated to peace-building endeavors and creating greater global understanding, Patrick is currently working on his autobiography, *Flipping Curse into Blessing*.