TRANSFORMATION

Practising mindfulness at the checkpoint

Is caring for ourselves an act of self-indulgence or social change? Alessandra Pigni tests the boundaries of "mindfulness" on the border between Israel and Palestine.

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To put meaning in one's life may end in madness,

But life without meaning is the torture

Of restlessness and vague desire –

It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid. - E.L Masters, Spoon River Anthology

It's 2008 and I've just arrived in Nablus, amid the human and emotional wreckage that followed the Second Intifada. As a psychologist with an international NGO, I'm here to provide therapeutic support to Palestinians who carry the wounds of the ongoing conflict and military occupation. I work with young men who have been in prison, mothers who have lost their children, and fathers who struggle with humiliation. Looking back I have no doubt who was the main beneficiary of this experience - me. Without it I would have no understanding of the power dynamics of foreign aid, no insight into the organizational culture that permeates relief agencies, and no direct experience of the exhaustion and loss of meaning that affects so many who choose humanitarian work, and end up in a nonprofit "rat-race" almost as competitive as that of the corporate world.

Fast forward to 2011 and I'm back in Palestine, no longer branded as an aid worker and this time using "mindfulness" to approach staff care in NGOs. Mindfulness is a very simple form of meditation that consists of focusing your full attention on your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Essentially it's about observation without criticism, and being compassionate with yourself and others – not exactly the characteristics that come to mind when thinking about Israel and Palestine. I've only been here a few days and Juliano Mer Khamis, the inspiring director of the Freedom Theatre, is shot in Jenin. A few more days go by and an Italian volunteer, Vittorio Arrigoni, is kidnapped and murdered in Gaza.

On the day the news breaks out, I've scheduled a mindfulness session for NGO workers in Ramallah. Is it appropriate to go ahead? No cancellations come through so I decide to stick to the original plan. The session is marked by anger, sadness and loss. The silent meditation and the personal enquiry that are built into the session provide a space to voice our fears and

confusion. Rather than self-indulgence, it turns out that mindfulness provides an oasis to hold the pain we face when working in emotionally-charged environments.

On my way back to Jerusalem I spend over an hour at Qalandya checkpoint. As the cold evening unfolds, I'm standing in line with a handful of other people. There is no logical reason why the soldiers keep us waiting, so I start to practice mindfulness at the checkpoint. I breathe to ground myself and it helps to contain my indignation over the bureaucracy of the occupation. A father and his five-year old child are standing in line ahead of me. He offers me an apricot and a smile, showing how kindness and beauty are present even in the midst of ugliness and violence.

The building of settlements and the separation wall in Palestine are keeping Israel's construction industry in good health. Meanwhile the Palestinians have become disillusioned with outsiders and politely tired of yet more NGOs and volunteers. Martha is one of these volunteers, based in Ramallah. She tells me how she's been working herself to exhaustion over the past twelve months, seeing little impact in the local community. She came to make a meaningful contribution and instead finds herself on the road to burnout, the malaise of so many in the NGO community.

Burnout signifies exhaustion, a state where "one is cynical about the value and meaning of one's occupation and doubtful of one's capacity to perform." Feeling worn-out and angry, Martha eventually decides to walk away from the NGO that has drained her energies. She's bitter and jaded for a while, but through talking and exploring mindfulness she begins to experience the benefits of reflection and self-care as a pre-requisite for effective action in the world. I call this 'post-burnout growth,' the early stage of using burnout

to start another journey of transformation.

The problem is that all the organizations that all the 'Marthas' work for look as if they have burnout built into their DNA: managers pushing for ridiculous working hours and "total commitment," for multi-tasking when focus is proven to be more effective, for action without reflection. Time for learning and care is seen as "time wasted." Of course there are exceptions, like the Palestinian grassroots group that is run by Hiba. She is adamant that organizational development and community empowerment can only happen when staff needs and priorities are properly attended to.

Building resilience and preventing burnout is a way to resist the neurotic frenzy of our times, but it's also a profound act of respect for those we aim to help. As the civil rights activist Audre Lorde once put it, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Women like Hiba may be isolated pioneers, but the path they are forging represents an exciting experiment where the personal and the political are truly inter-twined.

Mindfulness provides a breathing space to take stock and re-energize our actions from a place of care, awareness and creativity. For me it's a simple process: I sit quietly for five minutes, close my eyes, and breathe without distractions - no iphone, no laptop, no entertainment. That in itself is a move away from self-distraction. I can't make time for an hour of meditation every day, but I've found plenty of ways to use brief moments of mindfulness to check-in with myself and engage with the world from a different and healthier place, just like at the checkpoint.

'Sounds nice but that's impossible' I hear you say, but that's my point.

Discovering a practice like mindfulness amidst the mess and chaos is exactly what is needed. Going further, mindfulness works best when it is integrated into the organizational culture of an NGO. For example, Khaled uses it to ground himself before and after meeting families who have suffered traumatic events at the hands of the Israeli army or the settlers. Maram relies on it to stop surrendering to the many work demands that have contributed to her burnout. Anna finds it essential to deal with the sense of guilt she feels every time she says no to yet another project. John uses it informally in really difficult meetings, where there's no need to say 'and now, let's close our eyes and be mindful of the conflicts in the room.' All these are ways to combat the 'hyper-activism' that Thomas Merton described as such "a pervasive form of contemporary violence."

As we become overworked and under-supported, hyper-connected but disengaged, mindful but unaware, it's no surprise that burnout is spreading. Its impact still has to be fully-appreciated by NGOs who see burnout only in terms of stress, something to be treated by the pap of professional stress-management and work-life balance training. Mindfulness is so much more, if we are prepared to go beyond the fashions of the moment and acknowledge that we are hungry for deeper meaning in our lives, our jobs and our relationships with each-other. So here's a challenge for NGOs to end with: why not craft a culture of learning and care that is integrated into the day-to-day life of the workplace and the community? I've seen it happening and it works. Through learning and care we create meaning, and meaning is the antidote to burnout.

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