



The Ministry of Presence

by Sue Yockey, VCES Counselor

When I was five months old my father died. Here is the story about that day, as I learned about it from my mother. As my father was leaving for work he kissed my mother and me. When he got to the back door he stopped, turned around, came back to me, gently lifted me touching my tiny forehead with his lips, placed me back into my mother's arms, and left for work. A few hours later my mother got a phone call. He had died.

I often wondered why he kissed me twice. The answer was finally revealed to me as I listened to the homily on Sunday, April 17, 2016. The priest said, "We have been called to a 'Ministry of Presence.'" My father was so present to this calling that he passed it on to me the last chance he had. That kiss was a gift of remembrance. God spoke. Dad listened. My call sprouted in me.

I believe we are all called to a Ministry of Presence. Think of the power of being present to our children, parents, siblings, friends, and all those who cross our path! The person might even be a stranger. The profoundness of our calling is simple: God chose us. If each day we remember this, say "Yes," and trust, then we will have what we need to fulfill our Ministry of Presence.

One morning as one of the students approached me with a tale about a home event that he was so excited to talk about I was reminded of something I had been told earlier in the year and now recognize as a tip to guide my ministry. When someone talks to you be present to the person as if he or she is giving you a gift that you are anxiously unwrapping to discover its contents. Listening is so key. Not only to the words but to the feeling behind the sentences. Sometimes the words are just the means to express the emotion or to share the quality of the relationship with the ones involved in the main idea of the utterance.

When I stopped to listen, here are a few questions that ran through my mind. How can I keep the conversation going when I am greeting students? Can I welcome and stay connected? How do I answer the parent who had emailed me while maintaining oneness with this student? All good questions. Yet each of these thoughts took me away from being totally there for this student.

The more I reflected on this the greater was my awareness that each interaction in time is a meditative experience. Meditation is defined as "engaging in mental exercise for the purpose of

reaching a heightened level of spiritual awareness.” The reason for interacting with another is to discover the presence of God within that person. As we engage in conversation we are actually engaging in a dialogue with Divinity. One of our school prayers we call “The Respect Pledge” says this in another way. It states, “I believe that Jesus is in me, in each of my classmates, and in all people. All my actions will show my love and respect for Jesus.”

If we are being examples of this prayer, then all our interactions will be with Jesus. Our verbal and nonverbal exchange with another is a prayer. In prayer we need to be attentive to what God is saying or we may miss the message. But it does not matter if we get it or not because God will get it and respond to our prayer. As Ministers of Presence, God responds through us. With trust, we will have what we need to fulfill the Ministry of Presence to which we have been called. Trust.

When Challenges Become Opportunities

by Teisha Parchment, VCMS Counselor

As children move through the various milestones and developmental stages of pre-adolescence and adolescence, they will need to navigate the ups and downs of life. When they move through these stages towards independence, we see and are constantly reminded not only of the good things to come, but also of the obstacles, safety concerns and challenges they have to deal with in their rapidly changing world. We bear witness to the rise and fall of their emotions, conflict with peers, stress, anxiety, increased competition to get into "good schools," standardized tests and scores that seem like they make or break one's future and media that glamorize debates and reality TV shows that don't value empathy and instead heighten hate-filled, us-versus-them behaviors. We watch them try to maneuver through the world of cell phones and social media at a time when peer influence is strong, yet critical-thinking skills are not fully developed. And as a result, we want to protect them. We want to step in, bear the burden and do anything to keep them from failing or hurting.

Indeed, those fears and worries are valid. But is that the best and only approach to helping our kids? Do we give our kids the unintended message that they should have a fragile sense of self? Do we make them dependent on us to solve difficult situations? Are we actually teaching them the problem-solving skills they need?

Julie Lythcott-Haims, former dean at Stanford University and author of *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare your Kids for Success*, encourages parents to break free from parenting traps that are focused purely on success and doing everything "right." She urges us to instead, think about how we can help build up children to be creative, passionate, critical-thinking and independent adults and teach them the skills they need to get there. While shifting directions can be a major challenge, in order to help our children grow, we will also need to grow. And it will be necessary to sharpen our own tools and be open to exploring new approaches to help them learn the skills they need to move through these challenges. I often come back to the idea that we teach, not just through talking about the things that we value, but also by modeling and giving opportunities to practice those values and skills through different experiences. Part of our job in helping them grow is to expose them to resources and opportunities that help them build up their tool kit with the skills needed to create a happy, healthy and productive life.

As a school, we want to do just that. We want to challenge ourselves to grow, to learn new things, to help our students gain useful life skills and to complement the difficult, yet meaningful job you do as

a parent. We are constantly challenging ourselves to learn about the latest research about the brain and the brain-body connection. While there is no one thing or one tool that is the elixir for all problems, as we looked at research, we learned about all the benefits of mindfulness (the ability to focus awareness on the present moment) and yoga, such as increasing the ability to regulate emotions, increasing focus and attention, decreasing anxiety & gaining the ability to slow down enough to think before reacting.

So this year, we decided to introduce mindfulness and yoga to our students. We wanted to explore its application to the challenges that students experience and give them another tool to add to their tool kit to manage stress & anxiety, to increase focus and awareness. We began by introducing a mindfulness walk to 6th graders at Outdoor School. Then during first semester finals week, we provided drop in mindfulness and yoga sessions in the morning to all the middle school students. And we are hoping to have teachers implement mindfulness practices in their classrooms next year. As we continue to look at ways to incorporate mindfulness and yoga more consistently in a manner that is fitting to our school community, we hope that you begin to see your child using these skills. Being a parent is one of the most amazing gifts that calls us into being fully present and aligned with our values. And we hope that when difficult times come (and they will), that you also continue to challenge yourself to use them as opportunities to help your child strengthen their values, become mindful about how they move through life & treat others and grow their skills as they deal with the many challenges and highlights of their growing years.

Suggestions and Resources:

Books:

How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Over Parenting Trap and Prepare your Kids for Success by Julie Lythcott-Haims

Raising Kids to Thrive: Balancing Love with Expectations and Protection with Trust by Kenneth Ginsburg

The Mindful Teen: Powerful Skills to help you Handle Stress One Moment at a Time by Dzung X. Vo

Free movies about kids, mindfulness and its impact on academics and stress management:

[Healthy Habits of Mind](#)

[Room to Breathe](#)

A Look at Mindfulness

by Kelsey Manning, VCHS Counselor

Mindfulness. This new buzz word seems to be popping up everywhere; and as stress and anxiety team together in an attempt to take over, learning more about mindfulness might be a worthwhile effort. As teachers and parents, we constantly tell kids to calm down or pay attention so we can fit even more into their already overscheduled lives. Yet, at what point do we actually teach our kids how to calm themselves down or what paying attention really looks like? Think about it. When did you learn these important skills? Most of us just expect kids to already know how or figure it out by

copying those around them. Unfortunately, this doesn't always work. And this is where mindfulness can be an immensely valuable resource.

Mindfulness is, simply put, paying attention, consciously and non-judgmentally, to the present moment. An even simpler definition would be "noticing what is happening right now." By paying attention in this way, we gain the power and time to make decisions on how to respond to any given situation. Through practiced mindfulness, we can start to step away from constantly reacting without intention and sometimes without thought.

Through years of research and the implementation of mindfulness in hospitals and mental health agencies around the country, we've learned the great benefits that these practices can bring to chronic pain management, stress reduction, and prevention of relapse in many patients with depression. Though the research is still incomplete regarding the effects of mindfulness on education, there is plenty of evidence to support the control it provides kids over their attention and self-regulation abilities, skills that lead to better emotional balance, resiliency, self-awareness, empathy, and reduction in stress and anxiety.

So what exactly is it, and how does it work?

Scientifically, a consistent mindful practice helps the brain's emotional center learn to react more positively to incoming stressors. This, in turn, strengthens many of the other components of the brain that are often negatively impacted by stress and strong emotional reactions, such as the Prefrontal Cortex and Hippocampus which control our learning, memory, and executive functioning capacities.

Mindfulness itself can come in many shapes and sizes and is likely something we all do at some point every day, even if we are not aware of it. It can be as simple as taking a moment to intentionally breathe deeply when you feel overwhelmed. Taking the time to notice your surroundings when you are in a rush, rather than just speeding along to the next thing on your agenda. Focusing on how you are feeling in a given moment – not just to the emotion itself but to where it resides in your body or the story you tell yourself about the feeling. Paying more attention to the food you are eating rather than just shoving it in your mouth; what does it look like? How does it taste? Where did it come from? Stopping to smell the roses, or appreciating something new that you've never noticed before on your drive home. Even that moment you pause in anger and think before you speak is a mindful moment, one that potentially saves you from the heartache of mindlessly reacting and hurting a loved one by saying exactly what you are thinking.

Learning to live mindfully requires more than these simple acts but it starts with learning to recognize these moments when they occur so we can try to recreate them as much as possible. When you turn this intention into a few moments every day, it can become a more regular part of your life and you might be surprised by all the benefits.

For more information and deeper practice take a look at the following websites:

<https://www.headspace.com/science>

<http://www.mindfulschools.org/resources/articles/>

www.bestilkids.com

<https://hbr.org/2016/05/mindfulness-can-improve-strategy-too>

<http://www.mindful.org/>

Summer Resources

Valley Catholic Summer Music School – Summer music lessons will be available through August.

Jesuit High School Summer Program – They offer courses such as Study Skills and English Grammar.

Edison High School (Middle School Summer Program) – This summer program is aimed at supporting middle school students with learning differences. Students learn various strategies in math, reading or writing classes that they can use when they return to VCMS in the fall.

Executive Functioning Success with Marydee Sklar – Spend a few weeks in the summer working on time management, organization or homework struggles. Learn strategies that can be applied when students return to VCMS in the fall.

Yoga Calm with Jim and Lynea Gillen – Spend some time in the summer working on building habits that strengthen body and mind and learn skills to cope with stress, anxiety and focus. Check out their Jedi training class for boys.

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