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MINDFULNESS, SOLITUDE, AND THE NEW YEAR

By Scott Rogers → Special to the News

Columns

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Mindfulness refers to being present for one's life as it unfolds and to a series of practices that help cultivate greater mindful awareness. Both are regularly considered in this column, as lawyers and judges with longstanding engagement in mindfulness respond to questions from readers on the interface between mindfulness and law.

Over the course of 2019, we covered issues ranging from "ruminating over difficult decisions," "responding skillfully amid hostile adversarial conduct," "mindfulness and mediation," "mindful listening," "challenges in practicing mindfulness," "mindfulness and yoga," "leaving work at work," "finding balance," "supporting our client's well-being," and "compassion fatigue and self-care." We are grateful to Judi Cohen, Emily Doskow, Judge Alan Gold, Rosario Lozada, Katie Mastrucci, Andrew Rock, Christina Sava, and Lenny Simmons for their insightful and helpful responses.

This month's column explores "solitude," a subject that is receiving increased attention in today's digitally distracting world where anxiety, feelings of disconnection, and mental-health concerns are taking center stage. In his book, "Lead Yourself First: Inspiring Leadership Through Solitude," U.S. Circuit Court Judge Raymond Kethledge writes of the importance of solitude to leaders in finding clarity, creativity, emotional balance, and courage. Kethledge and co-author, Michael Erwin, offer a fascinating definition of solitude as "a subjective state of mind, in which the mind, isolated from input from other minds, works through a problem on its own." They explain that solitude can be found when sitting alone in a restaurant filled with people as when by yourself on a mountaintop.

Cal Newport, author of the recently released "Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World," draws on this insight and structures his book around the value of solitude and ways to cultivate it. He writes that "[i]f you avoid time alone with your brain your mental life will be much more fragile and much less productive."

Neither Kethledge nor Newport, in exhorting the importance of solitude, are talking about mindfulness meditation. For readers who find the practice of mindfulness to be a daunting enterprise, or are intrigued by the subject of solitude, you may enjoy reading about it from the perspective of these writers.

There is a wonderful point of intersection where solitude and mindfulness meet, and it is on this interior collaboration of the mind that this column closes the year. If you are in an environment largely isolated from the *inputs of other minds* (e.g., no podcasts, music, conversation, art, or, yes, even a good book), you are in a state of solitude. Since periods of solitude are increasingly hard to come by, let alone sustain, it is all the more important to seek them out. Once established, you can structure such periods to serve your intellectual and emotional interests.

Let's consider the routine activity of eating lunch to explore solitude and mindfulness. Perhaps you are in your office, at a restaurant, or at home. Solitude? It depends. If you watching a YouTube video, reading texts, or listening to music, you are not in solitude. The experience may be worthwhile but it does not constitute solitude. A shift into solitude is an undoing of sorts — a simplifying, a letting go. And, as Newport points out, periods of solitude are necessary for a meaningful processing and absorption of all the information you take in during the day.

So how might you practice solitude? Here are a few suggestions. Invite your mind to daydream — to intentionally meander in a way that is light and playful. Research on the benefits of daydreaming is compelling. But note, the mind left unattended runs the risk of moving into rumination and catastrophizing. The point being that you can't simply check out. You could turn your attention to the food itself, slowly savoring each bite. Here is a sweet spot where solitude and mindfulness meet in a practice known as "mindful eating." So too, you could use the time to think intentionally through a problem or reflect on your life, doodle, journal, or do anything else that pairs you with yourself.

Justice Stephen Breyer has been practicing solitude for years. He once shared that twice a day for between 10 to 15 minutes, "I sit peacefully. I relax and think about nothing or as little as possible." Solitude.

In *Digital Minimalism*, Newport writes of Thoreau eating lunch outdoors by a lake, upon finishing his meal, reading the paper wrapped around his lunch, and then journaling his reflections on the environment. This

is a nice coming together of mindful eating, focused reading, and reflective journaling. Inspired by Thoreau's culinary routine, below is a lunch-time solitude practice you might try:

- 1. Bring lunch to your office or sit outside and minimize distractions people, devices, music.
- Before you begin eating, spend a few minutes with your thoughts. Reflect on your morning, consider the afternoon sky, turn to your plans for the evening. Whether deliberate or spontaneous, follow your mind wherever it goes.
- 3. Begin to eat, slowly. If "mindful eating" is appealing to you, savor your food by attending to the various senses engaged, *e.g.*, sight, taste, smell, and touch. As an alternative, bring something meaningful to mind, perhaps gratitude. You can use your lunch as a period to reflect on your good fortune and those whose kindness and generosity has made a difference in your life.
- When you finish eating, extend the period of solitude a little longer, taking a few extra moments to enjoy chewing — this time on your experience.

Solitude is an adaptable practice that you can curate in many ways. Practicing mindfulness, especially unguided or lightly guided, is itself a practice of solitude.

As the year comes to a close and the busy, exciting, joyful, and emotionally tender moments of your life unfold, reflect on the ways you can spend meaningful time with yourself. Not only might you find it to be calming, refreshing, and productive, but it can also enrich the moments you spend with family and friends celebrating your time together journeying through this precious life.

If you have a question about mindfulness and integrating it into the practice of law that you would like answered in this column, send it to srogers@law.miami.edu.



Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D., is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness in law and founded and directs the University of Miami School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program where he teaches mindful ethics, mindful leadership, mindfulness and negotiation, and mindfulness in law. He is the creator of Jurisight, one of the first CLE programs in the country to integrate mindfulness and neuroscience and conducts workshops and presentations on the role of mindfulness in legal education and across the legal profession. He is author of the recently released, "The Mindful Law Student: A Mindfulness in Law Practice Guide," written for all audiences.