

FLORIDA BAR NEWS

THE MINDFUL LAWYER: ZOOMING OUT IN 2021

By Scott Rogers > Special to the News

Columns

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The rapid ascent of Zoom is reminiscent of Xerox and Google, two companies whose names became verbs. Unlike copying papers or conducting Internet searches, however, too much Zooming can wear us out, deplete us. Whereas Xerox involves copying data, and Google involves accessing data, Zoom turns us into data. As observer and observed, we move from conference to conversation to webinar,

sending and receiving information with the richness of all that we are reduced to a stripped-down streaming of audio and visual data. We have each become part of a television network lineup. It has all happened so fast and can be so exhausting that we not only run the risk of losing perspective but also a bit of ourselves.

In this column, I'll share with you a simple technique that you may find helpful in the middle of long stretches of Zoom meetings. We'll also consider how the technique can be applied to a variety of challenging moments, such as when having a difficult conversation, or reading unpleasant news reports, as this moment in history seems to leave us with no short supply.

FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND

Pause for a few breaths and focus attention on the middle word in this sentence.

For a few moments, the word "attention" became the focus of your attention. Importantly, it was not the entirety of your experience. You were aware, even if dimly, of so much more, such as sights and sounds, arising in the periphery. This is always the case. You can experiment with this by looking around. Each object you focus on moves into the foreground. Notice how as you shift attention from object to object, that which had been in the foreground moves into the background and whatever comes into the foreground had, a moment earlier, been part of the background. It's all still there, just a little less so. This foreground/background relationship calls into play the innate faculties of attention and awareness. While

mindfulness in not the explicit focus of today's column, it — along with the technique you will learn — involves the balancing of these two faculties.

As you might imagine, what you attend to in the foreground of experience chews up a lot of mental bandwidth and influences a good deal of activity in your brain. In contrast, what appears in the periphery is taken in more holistically. When on a Zoom call, this foreground/background relationship can be confined to what appears on the screen as the vastly larger landscape of your present moment experience is essentially closed off. You may know this from reading or watching news reports or immersing in an episode of your favorite show. As a general rule, the more fully your attention is captured, the more vulnerable is your emotional state and the less vivid that which is arising in the background.

THE ANTIDOTE TO ZOOM: ZOOM OUT

Many of us know "Zoom fatigue," all too well. Tired, we zone out; restless, we check our cell phone and e-mail, naively believing no one notices as we disengage. We notice it with others, of course, unless we too are zoned out. And we all are susceptible to the adverse effects this can have on our productivity, connection, and well-being.

The simple technique I call "zoom out" (or "zooming out") involves *intentionally* shifting perspective from foreground to background — from a narrow focus of attention to the larger field of awareness. Just as a camera's focus can zoom out from a single object, like a flower, and take in a more holistic and contextualized view, like the flower and garden in which it grows, so too can we. It's akin to relaxing a tight grip. As an example, right now you are likely reading this on your computer, tablet or cell phone. Your "attention" is narrowed within the frame of the devise; you are locked in. There is an energy cost that accompanies such intense focus and it can be helpful to loosen it up a bit. How? First soften your gaze and notice the entirety of the reading space. Then look beyond the device and take in the larger view. You'll likely find that tense muscles (eyes, shoulders, stomach) soften a bit, and a shallow or held breath frees up, as you take in a bit more of the richness of your experience in that moment. Try this during your next online video meeting. You can place a note nearby as a reminder, set a timer, or let the impulse to check for messages cue this shift. Such moments can also serve as helpful reminders to take a few

slower, deeper breaths, to stretch, and to reflect on how fortunate we are to have these devices, to live at a time when a global pandemic can be met with technology, to be interacting with other human beings.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS AND CHALLENGING NEWS REPORTS

Zooming out is similarly available amid a difficult conversation with another person, whether in person, over the phone, or online. So too, it can be useful when reading or viewing unsettling news reports. So, the next time you are doom-scrolling, zoom out and enlarge the view. Even if you remain fixed on the screen, you are reminded there is more out there than *met* the eye. The news report becomes a little smaller, moves into proportion. Similarly, the next time you are feeling agitated in a trying conversation, expand your view. Open to the sensory richness of that moment (things like sights and sounds, even your own thoughts and feelings). This attentional pivot is akin to stepping back and creating space. In broadening the container of your experience, you might just wake up to the larger humanity and complexity of the other person, and of yourself.

2021 is an important year for all of us, a defining moment in history, when holding multiple perspectives, seeing the larger picture, and not getting lost in narrow fields, will make a difference both to outcomes and to our well-being. Zooming out during Zoom sessions can be helpful unto themselves, and a practice for opening up to the larger view in general.

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.