Book Review

Mindfulness in library and information studies

Hailey Siracky
Director of Library Services, St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
E-mail: siracky@ualberta.ca

Michelle Reale. *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher: Strategies for Mindful Academic Practice*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2017. 144pp. ISBN 978-0-8389-1529-5 Softcover, $57.00.

Richard Moniz, Joe Eshleman, Jo Henry, Howard Slutzky, and Lisa Moniz. *The Mindful Librarian: Connecting the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship*. Waltham, MA: Elsevier, 2016. 238pp. ISBN 978-0-0810-0555-2 Softcover, $78.95; 978-0-0810-0561-3 eBook, $78.95.

Walk through any library in a North American college or university, and you are bound to see an invitation for students to be mindful. This might take the form of an advertisement for a free yoga class, a shelf of resources for meditation, or a table laid out with pages for colouring.

Mindfulness can be a difficult concept to define, but these activities and others like them are meant to encourage students to quiet their minds, become more aware of the present moment, and distance themselves from feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and stress.

While it is sometimes hard to convince a hardworking student to take a break, there is plenty of science that demonstrates that mindfulness activities actually improve learning and performance – and increasingly, librarians in higher education are recognizing the benefits not only of engaging in mindful activities *outside* of work or study, but also of applying mindfulness *to* them. Understanding that in order to impart mindful behaviour on others, we must learn to be mindful ourselves, two recent texts are efforts by practicing librarians to introduce particular mindful practices to others in the profession, and to contribute to the small body of literature – from both practical and scholarly contexts – on these activities and attitudes in the library and information professions: Michelle Reale's *Becoming a Reflective Librarian & Teacher*, and Richard Moniz, Joe Eshleman, Jo Henry, Lisa Moniz and Howard Slutzky's *The Mindful Librarian: Applying the Practice of Mindfulness to Librarianship.*

The subject matter of both texts can perhaps best be positioned under the umbrella of *contemplative practice*, which through associations such as the Centre for

Contemplative Mind in Society,[1] and the related Association for the Contemplative Mind in Higher Education,[2] is emerging as an approach, or suite of approaches, to both pedagogy and professional practice across the disciplines. As texts for practitioners, neither of these books is deeply theoretical or critical, but rather they serve as introductions for beginners. *The Mindful Librarian* is the more comprehensive of the two, offering both an overview of mindfulness and its scientifically proven benefits, and a thorough survey of the development of the mindfulness movement in education, before moving on to applying a mindfulness lens to undergraduate research, information literacy, reference work, library leadership, faculty relations, and solo librarianship. *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher*, in contrast, focuses on the practice of reflective writing, which can be understood as another mindful or contemplative activity.

While both texts are supported by scholarly literature, it is noteworthy that little of this literature comes from Library and Information Science itself, and that each text finds kinship in literature from the LIS-adjacent field of Education, as well as fields such as medical science, social science, and even occasionally business and management. After finishing both of these books, one of my lingering questions is why scholarly research in the areas of contemplative practice and LIS hasn't caught up with the enthusiastic efforts to apply these practices "on the ground."

The consequences of the absence of scholarly research in this area are most apparent in Moniz et al.'s *The Mindful Librarian*. The authors are clear that while their understanding of mindfulness is grounded in a Buddhist heritage, their intent is not to advocate for any particular religion. They acknowledge that much of the mindfulness literature from which they draw comes out of the Buddhist tradition, but their later implementation of mindful practices make little, if any, reference to these practices' Buddhist origins. Their intent to extract secular applications from these historically religious practices is in keeping with much of the modern Western view of mindfulness in general. And while they are certainly not the first to approach what are historically religious practices with the desire to apply them to secular contexts, scholarly attention to the current use of these practices in secular academic settings would help parse the ahistoricity with which we tend to approach them, enriching what is clearly a popular and beneficial set of practices with an appreciation for their roots. This would not only serve to deepen what we know about mindfulness, but would also provide opportunities to entwine our disciplinary concern for information with the breadth of mindful practices throughout history, in their fullness.

While it Moniz et al.'s reluctance to associate themselves with any religious tradition feels well-intentioned, as a means to be inclusive, it resulted in a definition of mindfulness so broad that it was difficult for me to understand what mindful behaviour actually looked like in concrete terms. Often, suggestions of where or how to

---

[1]http://www.contemplativemind.org/.
[2]http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/acmhe.

apply mindfulness were couched in tentative language, without concrete suggestions. In the chapter titled "Applying Mindfulness to the Undergraduate Research Process," for example, readers are encouraged to "develop an all-encompassing mindful nature and apply it as needed" (Moniz et al., 2016, pp. 62–63). Many times, the authors point out occasions to be mindful without giving the reader an explanation of how to do so, and while the empirical evidence that supports the benefits of mindfulness is clear in their early chapters, this vagueness has the effect of diminishing the perceived legitimacy of a set of practices we know have powerful positive effects. This, too, is a place where researchers in LIS have an opportunity to respond, by seeking data from our own discipline to understand the power of these activities in information contexts.

Despite this, *The Mindful Librarian* does a great deal of good work. Its chapters span the central activities of library work, and each one is grounded in a key text from the practical literature. For example, the chapter on mindful information literacy is centered around the *Association for College and Research Libraries' Information Literacy Framework*, and the chapter on mindful reference work, the *Guidelines for Behavioural Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*. While they cannot ground their writing in research from LIS, they do a thorough job of building their insights upon mindfulness-related studies from other fields, and thereby lay an excellent foundation upon which further research can build.

Where *The Mindful Librarian* is broad in scope, Michelle Reale's *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher* is narrow, focusing deeply on one single kind of contemplative practice, and grounding her work largely in her own experience. Her "friendly and informative guide" (p. xiv) to reflective practice for librarians in higher education is meant to be a first step on the journey to becoming reflective in one's profession. Reale says early on that she wrote the book she wanted to read, and her enthusiasm for the subject matter is evident.

Reale's conversational tone is among the real gifts of *Becoming a Reflective Librarian and Teacher*. She is honest, clear, and generous with her insights, and her confident truthfulness says as much to the reader about the benefits of intentional reflection as the most compelling list or citation ever could. Reale is a devoted practitioner of what she preaches, and the result is a text that is able to articulate the existential discomfort of reflection with depth, and respond to objections with the understanding of someone who has herself been challenged by the practice and struggled through it. With observations such as, "If we are not willing to reflect and write truthfully, revealing ourselves to ourselves, the reflection we think we are doing. . . keeps us bound to our rationalizations and excuses for doing things the way we have always done them" (2017, p. 25), we understand that Reale has given time and effort to the practice of reflection, and has experienced firsthand both its challenges and its transformational power.

When Reale writes about reflective practice, she is almost always referring to reflective writing, and has a whole chapter devoted to keeping a journal. This goes hand in hand with her belief that reflection is intentional, something we undertake

deliberately, "in order to take stock of our practice by interpreting, analyzing, and questioning the way we work" (p. 2). It is therefore best supported by the intentional act of setting aside time and space to engage with one's experience using the tools of a paper and pen. She concedes that, although a typed journal is better than no journal at all, journaling with pen and paper offers a meditative quality that comes in part because it requires us to slow down, thereby allowing us to process our experiences more deeply. She courageously offers excerpts from her own journal as examples of written professional reflection, which is one of the things I appreciated most about the book. For example, at the end of a reflection on teaching as an English liaison librarian, Reale says, "So I have sacrificed some content in order to build up some solid group dynamics and some confidence. So perhaps with a bit of that barrier broken down, in the next session they may be more receptive to what I am saying, because they just might be more receptive to me" (p. 75).

These excerpts gave me an opportunity to witness another librarian face self-doubt, discomfort, and fear in her profession, and find her way through it to a more authentic professional self.

While Reale, too, does not have extensive research from LIS to draw on, what makes *Becoming a Reflective Librarian & Teacher* so effective is its first-person point of view, and its author's skill in articulating her own extensive experience with reflection. Reale expresses herself in a way that models reflection, as much as it describes and promotes it, and this is convincing in a way that balances the absence of data from our discipline. The book is indeed a friendly and informative guide, but more than that, it is a compelling challenge to the assumption that our personal selves and our professional selves are, or ought to be, separate.

What is clear from both of these texts is that there is great interest in adopting and sharing practices like reflection, mindfulness, and other contemplative ways of navigating information from both users and practitioners in library settings. What remains to be known is how research in LIS will respond. There is certainly a place for more empirical research into how contemplative practices are being implemented by LIS practitioners, and to what effect. But there is also an opportunity for broader exploration from our discipline into what makes mindfulness as effective and attractive as these practical texts demonstrate, particularly as this relates to information. In *The Mindful Librarian,* the authors quote Western mindfulness expert Jon Kabat Zinn, who says, after encountering mindfulness during his studies in molecular biology, "I saw there were multiple ways of knowing things" (Moniz et al., 2016, p. 4). Finnish Information Studies scholar Jarkko Kari echoes this in his 2007 "Review of the Spiritual in Information Studies," where he, too, recognizes "there may be more ways of knowing than we usually realize" (Kari, 2007, p. 959). Contemplative practices are among these other ways of knowing, and in the research of Library and Information Studies, they are largely still waiting to be explored.

Reference

Kari, J. (2007). A review of the spiritual in information studies. *Journal of Documentation*. *63*(6), 935-962. https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410710836439.