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# Toward a Deeper Awareness: Becoming a Mindful Educational Leader

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Toward a Deeper Awareness:  
Becoming a Mindful Educational Leader

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
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## **Abstract**

This study explored the meditative *practice* and non-meditative *process* of mindfulness and its application to educational leadership. The definition of mindfulness that guided this research was – being attentive and aware in the present moment. Mindfulness was viewed as being more than meditation; it was seen as clear comprehension of a situation and being prepared and willing to address whatever happened. It was a way of understanding one’s self and one’s self in relation to others and the world. The purpose of this research was to construct a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. This Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) study provided a conceptualization of what it means to be a mindful educational leader. The conceptualization came from the application of a review: of mindfulness; of leadership as expressed in a way closest to mindfulness, and through the application of Scholarly Personal Narrative to the researcher’s experiences as an educational leader, and as a participant in major life-changing events. Data collection included: epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts. A parallax vantage analysis was utilized to uncover and identify universalizable themes within the narrative. These themes offered an understanding of the duality of mindfulness (awareness of self and others) that was linked to the duality of leadership that, at its base, is about the leader and the follower, and thus it is both self and relational. The resulting construct of mindful educational leadership would fill a gap in the academic literature on leadership and would offer to educational leaders, a reflective and purposeful way of being in the world.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to give my deep gratitude to my Supervisor, Dr. David C. Jones and my supervisory committee members, Dr. Colleen Kawalilak and Dr. James Brandon for their tremendous guidance and support.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate these pages to those who walk among us, sharing their wisdom, compassion, and grace.

For my beloved grandchildren, Sydney, Raiden, Calder, and Devin, who enliven my life with wondrous joy. I love you so, so, so much and so much more!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
<b>Chapter 1: Foundations.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Overview.....	1
Looking Back.....	2
Background and Context.....	6
Beyond the Still and Calm: Key Terms and Definitions.....	8
Rationale For the Proposed Study.....	10
Purpose of the Study.....	10
Research Puzzle.....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Methodology.....	12
Limitation and Delimitations of the Study.....	13
Assumptions.....	13
Significance of the Study.....	14
Organizational Structure.....	14
Summary.....	16
<b>Chapter 2: Review of Literature.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Overview.....	17
The Concept of Mindful Leadership.....	17
Mindful Leadership Based on a Meditative Mindfulness Practice.....	17
Contemplative Guidance for a Meditative Practice.....	19
Juxtaposition of Meditative and Non-meditative Mindfulness.....	22
Mindful Leadership Based on a Non-meditative Mindfulness Process.....	23
The Theoretical Underpinnings of Transformational, Servant, and Authentic Leadership in the Framework of Mindful Leadership.....	25
Aspects of Transformational Leadership.....	27
Aspects of Servant Leadership.....	28
Aspects of Authentic Leadership.....	28
Conceptualization of Mindful Educational Leadership.....	29
Mindfulness.....	30
Intrapersonal, Relational, and Developmental Components of Transformational, Servant, and Authentic Leadership.....	31
Operational Definition of Mindful Educational Leadership.....	32
Description of a Mindful Educational Leader.....	33
Summary.....	34
<b>Chapter 3: Scholarly Personal Narrative Methodology.....</b>	<b>36</b>

Genesis .....	36
Scholarly Personal Narrative .....	36
The Essence .....	37
Explication .....	37
Situation Within Personal Narrative Genre .....	40
Rationale For Choosing Scholarly Personal Narrative .....	42
Data Collection .....	46
Strategies .....	46
Methods .....	47
Methodological Contextualization .....	49
Summary .....	50
<b>Interlude.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Fall Promise .....</b>	<b>54</b>
Beginnings .....	55
Teacher.....	56
L.E.A.D.S. (Leading Education and Developing Schools) Program.....	58
School Administrator .....	63
Preparation .....	64
Undertaking.....	67
Action Research .....	68
New Position as an Administrator .....	73
Elementary School.....	73
Master of Arts in Leadership and Administration .....	75
Lessons Learned.....	76
<b>Chapter 5: Winter Endurance.....</b>	<b>79</b>
The News .....	79
Process .....	83
Impact .....	87
Aftermath .....	88
Turning Point .....	90
Wrap Up.....	91
<b>Chapter 6: Spring Resilience .....</b>	<b>92</b>
Thich Nhat Hanh.....	92
Spirituality in Leadership.....	93
Self-Realization.....	94
Reflection One .....	94
Reflection Two.....	95
Reflection Three.....	96
Reflection Four .....	98
Reflection Five.....	98
Living Through Catastrophe .....	100
The High River Flood .....	100

<b>Chapter 7: Summer Reclamation.....</b>	<b>105</b>
Outward-Inward Uncovering .....	105
Uncovering Perspective .....	106
Uncovering Efficacy .....	106
Uncovering Adaptability.....	107
Expanding Beyond From Within.....	108
Acceptance.....	108
Detachment .....	109
Letting Go .....	112
Unresolved Crisis.....	113
Expanding Awareness.....	114
Openness.....	115
Compassion and Loving-kindness .....	116
Deeper Awareness .....	116
 <b>Interlude.....</b>	 <b>118</b>
 <b>Chapter 8: Parallax Vantage .....</b>	 <b>119</b>
Explication .....	119
Steps Within the Process.....	121
Insight Meditation.....	122
Hatha Yoga Practice .....	124
Music.....	125
Rendering.....	126
Epistolary Letters .....	127
Journal Reflections.....	131
Reflection One .....	131
Reflection Two.....	131
Reflection Three.....	131
Reflection Four .....	132
Reflection Five.....	132
Narrative and Poetic Life Texts .....	133
Gathering the Puzzle Pieces.....	134
Depiction of the Pieces .....	136
Mindful Educational Leadership.....	136
Mindful Leadership in Schools.....	137
Community of Grace.....	138
 <b>Chapter 9: Reflexive Reverberations .....</b>	 <b>140</b>
Completion.....	140
Puzzle Depiction .....	141
Personal Insights .....	141
Professional Insights .....	142
Conceptualization .....	143
Perceptions.....	145
Limitation and Delimitations .....	145



Significance.....	146
Illustration.....	146
Contributions.....	146
Implications.....	147
Final Rendering.....	148
<b>References.....</b>	<b>150</b>

## **Chapter 1: Foundations**

*It is here, at the convergence of my crucible experiences that I have been transformed.*

*Momentous life alterations have rendered me more whole than I was, and more alive...*

- D. Bearance, 2014

### **Overview**

There may be times in our lives when a momentous event occurs that deeply affects us and causes a shift in our perspectives or perhaps even a significant change in our ways of being. This impetus might be a personal crisis or a traumatic event. Whatever the cause, we can be profoundly impacted. We may become something other than what we were, with transformations of psychological and spiritual import. If this happens, we might realize that we will never be the same because we have transcended how we were before this critical incident. As a result, we may have a crucible experience that alters who we are and how we are in the world (Bennis, 2009, p. xv). By crucible experience, I mean a circumstance beyond our control, with concentrated forces either internal, external, or both, that cause or influence a meaningful change or development to happen.

What follows is a narrative of crucible experiences that had a profound and meaningful influence on my professional practice, my personal life, and my way of being. This is the story of my mindfulness journey to a deeper awareness of self and others. My journey entails experiences as an educational leader and a participant in life-changing events. I use a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) to highlight and explicate the concept and experience of mindfulness which, when aligned with certain types of leadership, lays the basis for the relevance and importance of mindfulness to the emerging conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. It is the description and

understanding of the emerging concept and the suggestion that it may be relevant to a reader concerned with living the life of an educational leader that are the major contributions of this research. I begin first with my own story, which is the genesis of this dissertation.

### **Looking Back**

In my early years as a high school Assistant Principal, I was singularly focused on administrative duties and professional development. In those days, I felt that the purpose of my leadership role was to improve student academic achievement. I was very focused on work and gave little consideration to wellbeing (which I define as a healthy physical and emotional state). Then I became the chair of an Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) three-year action research project in our school that focused on finding ways to engage at-risk high school students. What I mean by the term, “at-risk”, were students who were in danger of not graduating from high school. One of the findings from that study was the importance of building personal connections with students. Letting those students know that they were cared about as individuals was foundational in keeping them motivated in coming to school and engaging in the learning process. Another key outcome of the study was that the teachers who participated were encouraged to develop a self-reflection of their professional practices.

Building connectedness in relationships and being reflective about my professional practice were two key skills I took with me to my next position as an elementary Vice Principal in a different school division. Even though I was still concerned with academic achievement, my primary goal was to develop authentic relationships with staff, students, parents, and the community. As a new administrator in that division, I had to undergo a one-year evaluation process that meant I needed to prove myself, not only to my school community, but to the administration of the division as well. I also began my Master degree program during that

time. It was an intensive year, with many commitments and responsibilities. I often neglected to look after myself while deeply invested in nurturing and supporting others.

Then half way through my second administrative year in this new position, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Faced with this battle, I soon realized that I needed to put all of my time and energy into healing and recovery. As a cancer patient, I was encouraged to see a psychologist to support me through the trauma of the post-surgery and treatment phase of recovery. The psychologist I was referred to happened to be an expert in meditative mindfulness practice and its therapeutic benefits. He recommended that I read *Full Catastrophe Living* by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990), a professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. His book provided very worthwhile guidance on how to meditate and practice mindfulness. It assisted me in healing and embarking upon a journey of self-awareness and attunement (which, for the purposes of this dissertation, means a heightened sensitivity to others).

Two years after the initial diagnosis of cancer, a friend of mine, who had been in my Masters program cohort, asked me to take a graduate course with her at the University of Calgary. This course was entitled, *Spirituality and Inspired Leadership*, and the instructor was Dr. David C. Jones. The course description resonated with me so I enrolled. I soon realized that I wanted to continue with my academic and spiritual journeys and decided to pursue a PhD in Educational Research, specializing in Leadership. The topic for my dissertation evolved out of a desire to share the impact that mindfulness had on my personal and professional ways of being.

Almost a year after beginning my PhD program, a catastrophe occurred which caused me to draw even more strength and sustenance from my mindfulness practice. In June of 2013, a disastrous flood occurred in High River, the town where I live. My home was devastated and I

lost many irreplaceable belongings. I truly believe that my practice of mindfulness was instrumental in helping me deal with this calamity, become more resilient, and recover from the decimation. It took a year to repair the damage done to my home and come to terms with the loss. This experience brought me to an even deeper sense of self-awareness and attunement to others. Everyone who lived in High River was affected to some degree by the flood. Many of my neighbours became what I refer to as the “walking wounded”. These are individuals who were unable to get past the catastrophe and carry on with their lives in a constructive manner because they were not able to relinquish their anger, move beyond their grief, and accept their loss. Consequently, their life forces were diminished and they were unable to find a way to revitalize. After having witnessed this, I wrote these lines of poetic life text that served as an impetus for sharing my story through the application of the methodology known as Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013):

*I do not want to render lifeless this experience of destruction  
thereby giving power to its consuming nature.*

*Instead, I want to share the enlivened energy of determination and resilience;  
to story it in an uplifting way as an inspiration for those indomitable spirits,  
to help them awaken from their wounded lethargy.*

Seeing the human damage caused by this catastrophic flood was the catalyst for writing a personal narrative of how my mindfulness practice helped me face and overcome challenges and difficulties, in the hope that it may be of some benefit to others.

During and after the flood, I witnessed the many ways that mindful leadership aids and benefits people when a catastrophe occurs. In the midst of this devastation, there were instances where mindful leadership intervened to bring equanimity, strength, purpose, and action to

situations of overwhelming uncertainty, despair, and suffering. Mindful leadership, such as that exhibited by Calgary's Mayor Naheed Nenshi, provided the calm and right action in the aftermath of this calamity to support the survivors to find the determination to carry on, one effort at a time, one day at a time. This crucial assistance helped many flood victims reconnect with their own perseverance so they could recover, rebuild, and renew their lives and homes. When mindfulness was expressed outwardly, it gave others hope and courage. Mindfulness demanded of individuals to look not only at the physicality and emotionality, but the spirituality of being human. Mindful action took care of people by providing them with shelter, food, and other resources while mindful compassion provided solace for the heart and the soul.

This dissertation is a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) of what mindful educational leadership is and why it matters. Interwoven in this telling, are the origins and qualities of mindfulness and an examination of how it has been applied to leadership. Other expert voices are added to the story that assert the essence, significance, and implications of mindfulness and leadership as well as further considerations and concerns.

Mindfulness is a self-awareness and a relational practice of being with others in an attentive and considerate manner. Each day, I make a concerted effort to live in a mindful way. I want to declare from the beginning that I am not Buddhist. This is not a religious way of conducting myself; rather, it is an authentic way of being who I am. I write about mindfulness with deep humility and gratitude. Being mindful helped me recover from pain and suffering, assisted me in building and maintaining healthy relationships both personally and professionally, and gave me the clarity and presence of mind to overcome difficulties and challenges that often felt daunting and sometimes insurmountable. I came to understand that developing a mindful practice would

enable me to be an educational leader who facilitates others to become more self and relationally aware, thus supporting the cultivation of an educational institution that encourages and values the practice of mindfulness.

### **Background and Context**

Over the past several years there has been growing interest in the use of meditative mindfulness practice in schools (MacDonald & Shirley, 2009; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Ritchart & Perkins, 2000). Teachers, in both primary and secondary schools, are under increased pressure to improve the academic performance of their students, which creates a tension and strain on them as well as their pupils. Educational systems are faced with finding ways to engender greater knowledge and understanding to produce a new generation of students for a workforce that is not only educated but creative and innovative as well. However, this academic pursuit does not take into consideration that its approach is causing students to become “increasingly stressed, alienated, terminally bored, and even turned off to learning” (Kabat-Zinn, 2014, p. ii). According to Kabat-Zinn, this current educational process overlooks “the domain of interiority – of the inner life of the growing learner” and how it might be:

recognized, attended to, nurtured, and developed in concert with all the outer knowledge and competencies so that each child learns how to be at home in his or her own mind and body, and how to cultivate self-awareness, emotional intelligence, confidence, and resilience in the face of stress of all kinds and the pressures to perform, to be a certain way, and to fit in. In my [Kabat-Zinn’s] experience nurturing and validating interiority also serves as a catalyst for creativity and imagination. (p. ii)

As a result of this exclusion of the “interiority of the learner” more and more teachers are finding ways to promote self-awareness, confidence, and a sense of belonging in their classrooms

(MacDonald & Shirley, 2009; Rechtschaffen, 2014). In addition to optimizing student learning, teachers are including the development of wholeness competencies (Rechtschaffen, 2014).

Kabat-Zinn (2014) argued that:

such competencies include developing the ability to know and recognize our own thoughts and emotions as ‘events’ in the field of awareness and how to disentangle ourselves when we are completely caught up in their content and emotional charge. Simple mindfulness practices can offer reliable strategies for working with the storms and turbulence that inevitably overtake the mind at times and cause sadness or anger, or a sense of not fitting in, of not being good enough, or even not wanting to learn. It promotes increased calmness, focus and concentration, greater impulse control and reduced aggression, and increased empathy and understanding of others among other important outcomes. (p. ii)

By utilizing mindfulness practices in the classroom to facilitate the development of these wholeness competencies, teachers are creating practical opportunities for their students to become more self-aware, explore their individual ways of being, and foster a social awareness and connection.

In December of 2013, Chris Ruane, a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, and a former teacher in Wales, advocated for mindfulness training in schools in a powerful speech in Parliament addressed directly to the Minister of Education sitting opposite him in the chamber. His speech, which was entitled “*Mindfulness in Education,*” drew attention to the reasons why the efforts in the UK to bring mindfulness into primary and secondary education are so important, and why all classroom teachers should be provided the opportunity to obtain quality training in mindfulness. He highlighted a number of programs as exemplars, including what is called the “.b” program, a curriculum developed by Mindfulness in Schools, that is the work of



two secondary school teachers, Chris Cullen and Richard Burnett. Their group has a research program linked to the Oxford University Centre for Mindfulness.

I propose that to create a school that wholeheartedly facilitates the development of mindfulness requires an educational leader who is mindful. This is someone who engages in a mindfulness practice to become more self-aware and attuned to others. A mindfulness practice involves being fully aware, present, and attentive in the moment.

### **Beyond the Still and Calm: Key Terms and Definitions**

The definition of mindfulness that guided this research is: being attentive and aware in the present moment. Mindfulness is more than meditation (a technique which it may in certain versions include), more than being still and calm (although this is certainly an element of it); it is also about clearly comprehending a situation and being prepared and willing to address whatever happens. Kabat-Zinn (1990), described mindfulness as: “moment-to-moment awareness.... a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of inquiry and self-understanding....[to cultivate] insight within yourself...” (pp. 2, 12).

Mindfulness is a way of understanding one’s self and one’s self in relation to others and the world. Mindful leadership is a calm “leadership presence” through the “cultivation of clarity, focus”, awareness, and attunement, as well as “creativity and compassion in the service of others” (Marturano, 2014, p. 11).

An essential component of mindful leadership is awareness. It is a conscious state of being that enables a person to fully and deliberately notice what is happening inside and outside of her or his human experience. Awareness is an innate capacity; it is something that we already possess. Kabat-Zinn (2014) argued that for us to awaken the potential of awareness, we must “learn to inhabit it, integrate it into our day, and make use of it in navigating the ins and outs and

twists and turns of our unfolding lives” (p. ii). To be relationally aware, an individual should be attentive to the lives of others, and therefore, be attuned to them and their needs. Thus, a mindfulness practice is: looking deeply into one’s self for understanding and insight; using meditative breathing techniques to calm the mind and body, to acknowledge thoughts and let them go, and having active awareness of self and others in the present moment. With a mindfulness practice, one can develop wholeness competencies which are: self-understanding and awareness; clarity (meaning a mind that is clear of distracting thoughts and emotions) and focus; an integrated mind and body connection; and, attunement to self and others, all of which is a totality of being that promotes health and insight (Rechtschaffen, 2014).

Insight meditation is a way to “inhabit” mindfulness through the cultivation of attention and a “specific nonjudgmental awareness of present-moment stimuli without cognitive elaboration” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 6). It offers psychological and spiritual insights, a depth of awareness, inner peace, and a profound and liberating sense of present moment reality (Titmuss, 2009). I used insight meditation to assist me in obtaining clarity and focus as I conducted my research. My data included epistolary letters (which are personal missives that reveal thoughts, observations, and perspectives) that add to the existing narrative of the original text (Nash & Bradley, 2011), journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts (which are renderings of my life observations and experiences). This data captured my personal and professional experiences with mindfulness and further illustrated its application to educational leadership. Mindful educational leadership, which is defined to a greater extent and described in Chapter Two, embodies self and relational awareness. The ultimate goal of mindful educational leadership is to support others in becoming mindful and in turn, create an institution that encourages and values mindfulness.

## **Rationale For the Study**

Institutions are looking for a leadership approach that engages and connects the workforce in a way that produces commitment and performance (Carroll, 2007; Marturano, 2014). Mindful leadership would fill this need; therefore, it has significant implications for the field of education. A study that investigates the emerging construct of mindful educational leadership would help define the self-orientation and relational-orientation components of this new concept and would be a natural extension of both the current mindfulness and leadership literature. Although the practice of mindfulness has been studied for centuries, the focus has been almost solely at the level of the individual. There is limited research on mindfulness as a relational frame or as an educational leadership process. Thus, a study of how mindful educational leadership engages and connects with others in an institution would serve to inform and extend that literature.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to construct a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. Through a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) of my crucible life experiences and my school administrator experiences, I tendered the proposition that mindfulness is a meaningful and useful construct in educational leadership. When those experiences (both personal and professional) were looked at through a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013), they offered an understanding of mindfulness that is applicable to the concept of educational leadership. The duality of mindfulness (awareness of self and others) can be linked to the duality of leadership that, at its base, is about the leader and the follower, and thus it is both self and relational. Further, I argue that this examination comprises and adds to the existing scholarly literature on educational leadership. This study is important because it leads to a more

comprehensive understanding of the self and relational awareness elements of mindful educational leadership and its situation within the broader leadership framework.

### **Research Puzzle**

I use the term “research puzzle” because it is an apt descriptor of my research process and purpose (Clandinin, 2013, p. 42). The pieces that I fit together to construct an image or conceptualization of mindful educational leadership are found within the relevant literature on educational leadership and mindfulness as well as my scholarly personal narrative. The purpose of this research was to combine the elements of scholarly investigation with personal narrative to create a depiction of what mindful educational leadership looks like from the viewpoint of an operational definition and description.

The personal narrative element of the research examined my life-changing and professional experiences with mindfulness and looked for meaning pieces in them. I proposed that mindfulness would enable me to function more effectively as a school administrator. It helped me recover from the trauma of cancer and rebuild after the flood’s devastation. I gathered these pieces from the concept of mindfulness as well as my experiences as a mindful practitioner to determine if there was a larger picture of meaning for educational leadership.

Mindfulness practice is a significant piece of the research puzzle because it can be beneficial to educational leaders as it offers a way to clear one’s mind and focus “so that the mind can actually function freely to engage in what is necessary to be done in any particular situation” (Smith, 2012, p. xiv). Once the mind has achieved clarity, it can be more attentive to one’s self and others which increases self-awareness and relational awareness. A mindful educational leader, with deeper internal and external awareness, can uncover the veils of preconceptions and emotional responses that obscure the ability to remain open, attentive, and engaged in life and

work. Mindfulness is a way of envisioning one's self and one's self in relation to others and the world. As Shapiro and Carlson (2009) stated, mindfulness "helps expand our vision of self, other, health, and healing, and invites us to inhabit our own bodies, hearts, and minds with greater presence, aliveness, and awe (p. xiii). As one is able to see a less obscure viewpoint of reality, there is an increase in feelings of equanimity, compassion, and joy which would be of benefit not only to one's self, but also others, as well as the educational institution.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the search for the puzzle pieces and their compilation for the construction of this research puzzle to depict a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership:

1. a. What is the definition of mindfulness?
  - b. What are its origin(s) and characteristics?
  - c. How can mindfulness be further developed during crucible life experiences?
2. a. How might mindfulness be of benefit to educational leaders?
  - b. How might it be of benefit to the institution of education?
  - c. How might mindfulness inform the concept of educational leadership?

### **Methodology**

This study utilized the pieces that my Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) offered to explore my mindfulness practice of personal and relational awareness gained through my crucible life and professional experiences in the hope that it might be useful for other educational leaders. Understanding and interpreting the research on the emerging construct of mindful educational leadership also required an examination of the mindfulness and mindful leadership literature.

Data was collected from epistolary letters and journal reflections that were written during my professional years as an educator and administrator. Narrative and poetic life texts of my crucible experiences also provided data. This data collection was subsequently examined for the purpose of identifying emerging themes. More particularly, from the professional recollections and the personal life narrative, themes emerged which were then related to the research questions. These themes provided, through the storied narrative of the writer, a comprehension of mindfulness as that understood in the academic literature allowing the writer to link those understandings to the concept of leadership – in particular - educational leadership.

### **Limitation and Delimitations of the Study**

The limitation of this study was a lack of substantive scholarly investigation of the chosen area of research – mindful educational leadership. As far as this researcher was able to ascertain, there was a gap in the academic literature regarding the explicit mention of the self and relational awareness orientations of mindful educational leadership. The delimitations of this study might be perceived as: (a) the choice of methodology, which is Scholarly Personal Narrative and (b) the researcher being the focus of the study.

### **Assumptions**

There were several significant assumptions regarding this research. The first assumption was that mindfulness is required to come to a deeper understanding of self and others. The second was that an examination of self and relational awareness would be beneficial to an educational leader. The third was that mindfulness is crucial and implicit in effective leadership. The fourth was that mindful leadership would be a benefit to the institution of education. Finally, the last assumption was that Scholarly Personal Narrative can be used as a research methodology to explore mindfulness and mindful educational leadership.

## **Significance of the Study**

A study that examines how mindfulness can be linked to leadership helps to define the mindful educational leadership construct – and would be a natural extension of both the current leadership and mindfulness literature. There is limited literature on mindfulness as a social process or as an educational leadership process. A study that applied mindful relational practices to educational leadership serves to inform and extend that literature. By exploring the *practice* and *process* of mindful leadership that engages others in an institution, this research contributes to both the education and leadership fields. The resulting construct of what it means to be a mindful educational leader fills a gap in the academic literature on leadership and offers to educational leaders a reflective and purposeful way of being in the world.

## **Organizational Structure**

This research utilizes a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) to explore a mindfulness practice and its application to educational leadership. Chapter One provides the foundations for the research study. Chapter Two is the review of the relevant literature selected to provide a depth of scholarly context and a breadth of expert knowledge for this study. This literature review of mindful leadership is comprised of the following three parts. The first part examines the literature regarding the conceptualization of mindful leadership as it is derived from a meditative *practice* and from a non-meditative *process*. The second part explores the literature regarding the types of leadership (transformational, servant, authentic) that in my view provide the underpinnings for the framework of mindful leadership. The third part considers parts one and two as they merge to offer what is, for the purposes of this dissertation, the concept of mindful educational leadership. In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology and data collection process. I begin with a

discussion of how I came to choose Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) for my methodology. Next, I explain Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013), give my rationale for using it, and discuss where it is situated within the personal narrative genre by comparing and contrasting it to memoir, autobiography, and auto-ethnography. Finally, I provide a methodological contextualization of Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013).

Between Chapters Three and Four, there is an Interlude to prepare the reader for the transition between the foundational chapters and the Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013). In Chapter Four, I relate my professional educational leadership journey from the beginning, first as a teacher, then as a member of the inaugural L.E.A.D.S. (Leading Education and Developing Schools) program in my school division. My participation in this program inspired me to apply for an administrative position in my school. I was successful in my application and became an Assistant Principal who was also the chair of a three-year Action Research conjoint project with the University of Lethbridge. After this work, I changed administrative positions as well as school divisions, and became a Vice Principal of an elementary school. I also completed my Masters degree program in Administration and Leadership. Chapter Five contains the narration of my crucible life experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer, undergoing radiation treatments, and then recovering from the attendant mental anguish and physical suffering. It also speaks of my discovery of the practice of mindfulness and its healing benefits. In Chapter Six, I describe my continuing educational endeavours as a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education's Leadership program at the University of Calgary. During this time, I also faced another personal calamity, a



flood's decimation of my home and its subsequent reconstruction, which tested my mindfulness and I believe, made it stronger. Chapter Seven reveals my further inward journey of self-uncovering that I believe resulted in a deeper self-awareness and attunement. Most importantly, this chapter embodies the restoration of my true Self and the wholeness of my mind, body, and spirit connection.

After Chapter Seven, there is another Interlude to provide a transition for the reader in preparation for the final two chapters. Chapter Eight captures the analysis of the data collected in the preceding four narrative chapters. Insights, lessons, and acquired knowledge are captured in order to identify themes for applicability. Finally, in Chapter Nine, I present the findings of my Scholarly Personal Narrative and its contributions to the educational literature as well as to the field of educational leadership.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined the foundations of this dissertation. It began with an introduction of the researcher and the topic of the thesis that centered on the examination of mindfulness, the application of mindfulness to leadership, and the rationale for considering a mindful educational leadership construct. It continued with the background and context of the study; then, key terms and definitions. After that, I presented the rationale for and purpose of the study, followed by the research puzzle and research questions. Next, there was an explanation of the methodology, Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013), with a summary of the limitation and delimitations of the study and the researcher's assumptions. Then came a discussion of the significance of the study. Finally, there was an overview of the organizational structure of the dissertation. The next chapter provides a review of the relevant literature for the appropriate situation of the subsequent research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Overview**

This chapter is a review of the relevant literature on mindfulness and leadership and is comprised of the following three parts. The first part examines the literature regarding the concept of mindful leadership as it is derived from a meditative *practice* and from a non-meditative *process*. The second part explores the literature regarding the types of leadership (transformational, servant, authentic) that I contend provide the theoretical underpinnings for the framework of mindful leadership. The third part considers parts one and two as they merge to offer what is, for the purposes of this research, the conceptualization of mindful educational leadership.

### **The Concept of Mindful Leadership**

In the literature, mindful leadership was viewed from two perspectives: one that was based on a meditative mindfulness *practice*, and one that was based on a non-meditative mindfulness *process*. A meditative *practice* has its roots in the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness. A non-meditative *process* is drawn from an empirical, attentional approach to mindfulness.

#### **Mindful Leadership Based On a Meditative Mindfulness Practice**

Carroll (2007) applied mindful meditative practice to leadership and explored how being mindful would make a leader more grounded, empathic, nonjudgmental, patient, courageous, and confident. He focused on the leadership traits displayed by leaders, who in his view, were mindful. Carroll asserted that mindful leaders were courageous in their capacity to address tough issues. Furthermore, they were humble and compassionate, rather than aggressive and ego driven. In addition, they were selfless, putting others' interests above their own that meant they were attentive to the actual reality of the organization rather than being driven by ego

gratification. Each of these descriptors implied a kind of leadership that built relationships, nurtured others, and supported them to realize their full potential during times of change, although Carroll did not explicitly say how the mindful leader did that.

Gonzales (2012) and Marturano (2014) further contributed to the concept of mindful leadership. Gonzales described mindfulness as a technique for “noticing the way things are” and suggested that it is a skill that can be developed through meditation training (p. 6). She offered a trait-based perspective of mindful leadership that outlined nine characteristics: being present, aware, calm, focused, clear, equanimous (which means someone who, according to Gonzales, “has an even temperament”, is “in control, and has sound decision making skills and judgment”), positive, compassionate, and impeccable (pp. 6-7, 144). During uncertain and difficult times, leaders need “an unprecedented presence of mind”; success depends on the ability to effectively work with constant change and upheaval (Gonzales, 2012, p. 3). She suggested that:

mindfulness meditation and mindfulness principles provide leaders with a way to incorporate mindfulness into every aspect of their lives, allowing them to reduce stress, to maintain awareness and focus, and to optimize their effectiveness and decision making, both personally and professionally. (pp. 8-9)

Marturano (2014) also proposed that a leader could become mindful by practicing meditative mindfulness. She defined a mindful leader as someone who “embodies leadership presence by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the service of others” (p. 11). She stated that mindfulness training is a method of “developing the mind’s innate capabilities”, including the capacity to be fully present (p. 45). According to Marturano, a mindful leader is someone who possesses these attributes: nonjudgmental, open-minded, open-hearted, self-aware, patient, humble, trusting, collaborative, and compassionate. Marturano’s concept of mindful

leadership, based on the utilization of meditative techniques, was drawn from the work of Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in mindfulness training.

In 1979, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is a professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, established the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society and its world-renown Stress Reduction Clinic. Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994, p. 4). Being attentionally aware aided in decreasing levels of stress, so that individuals could “stop reacting to stress and begin responding to stress. This is the path of mindfulness in daily life” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 263). It was through a collection of mindful practices, including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) that Kabat-Zinn brought mindfulness into the mainstream of western medicine and society. He described mindfulness as:

a form of meditation originally developed in the Buddhist tradition.... Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness.... just a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of inquiry and self-understanding.... Cultivating mindfulness can lead to the discovery of deep realms of relaxation, calmness, and insight within yourself.... Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing. (pp. 2, 12)

Mindfulness promoted a contemplative practice that aided in self-inquiry and the reflective inner journey to self-knowledge and wholeness. It was through contemplation that an individual lived more consciously. A meditative practice developed a greater capacity to become more consciously aware, to connect and compassionately engage, to support and be of service to others.

**Contemplative guidance for a meditative practice.** The meditative practice which Kabat-

Zinn, Marturano, Gonzales, and Carroll wrote about was influenced by the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness that had been in existence for over 2500 years. The Buddha offered contemplative guidance and instruction for the development of mindfulness. He taught that, “what we frequently dwell upon and ponder becomes the inclination of our thoughts” (Groves, 2013, p. xv). According to the Buddha’s teachings:

it matters profoundly which of the many emotions and thoughts that bubble into our experience we pursue and foster. He passionately urged his students to know their motivations, responses, beliefs, and emotions and see their effects. And he devised a detailed and subtle methodology for change which he formulated in the Eightfold Path. (Groves, p. xv)

The Eightfold Path is a way leading out of unsatisfactory experience to a path where wisdom can be developed and self-awakening can occur. One of the essential tenets of the Eightfold Path is right mindfulness meaning conscious attention and awareness (Kornfield, 2008, p. 218).

I was inspired and influenced by other books that offered a rich depth of contemplative guidance that I drew upon in my mindfulness practice. I found insight and wisdom in the offerings of such meditation and awareness teachers as Ajahn Chah, Thich Nhat Hanh, and David Hawkins. What follows is a brief synopsis of the above teachers’ pertinent instructions, guidance, and writings.

Chah (2001), who was a Thai meditation teacher, provided a clear approach to meditation that focused on insight practice, concentration, and liberation. Chah saw meditation as a way to develop wisdom. He proposed that wisdom was for the purpose of liberation, which is freedom from all the negative conditions and phenomena that everyday living presents us with. He taught that wisdom is a way of living and being that is free of clinging and attachment. Practicing

mindfulness (sati in Sanskrit) and training in concentration (samadhi) makes the “mind firm and steady” to cure its dis-ease and “bring it back to its natural healthy state” (Chah, Breiter, & Kornfield, 1985, p. 6). He encouraged everyone who heard his teachings to put them into practice and understand them through experience.

Hanh (1991) is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk whose teachings cultivated the nonjudgmental aspect of mindfulness. This was the insight of interbeing, or Right View, that could remove discrimination, intolerance, anger, fear and despair. He guided people to a path of right understanding and true love through compassion, loving speech, and deep listening that leads to healing, transformation, and happiness. The practice of mindfulness assisted concentration that in turn led to insight (prajna). The insight that was gained from mindfulness meditation could “liberate us from fear, anxiety and anger, allowing us to be truly happy” (Hanh, 2009, p. 4).

Hawkins (2012), who was a nationally renowned psychiatrist, physician, researcher, and spiritual teacher, wrote about consciousness, meditation, spiritual awareness, self-realization, compassion for all beings, as well as the alleviation of suffering and joy. One of his powerful books, which was a guide for alleviating suffering was entitled, *Letting Go: The Pathway to Surrender*. It provided a “mechanism to unlock our innate capacity for happiness, success, health, well-being, intuition, unconditional love, beauty, inner peace, creativity, and advanced consciousness” (Grace, 2012, p. ii). Hawkins (2012) wrote that through the “letting go of negative emotions” there was an “expansion of awareness, progressive realization, and experiencing of the real inner Self.... one’s true identity” (p. 12).

These relevant, profound, and insightful offerings from Hawkins, Hanh, and Chah were interwoven in my personal narrative about the cultivation of my mindfulness practice. Although

there are many contemplative practice books, I chose to highlight the work of these three particular instructors because their guidance resonated most strongly with my head, heart, and spirit. Their instructions showed me a way to find a release from the burdens and heavy stresses of everyday struggles, to become lighter in my being, to become more whole, and more alive. Their teachings helped me to realize what it meant to be on a higher path of consciousness, to love and care for my self and others. They taught me how to be silent and still, to find an inner peace, and a mindful awareness, which allowed for a fuller and more present engagement with the world. To know one's self deeply, to have a listening heart, to be a compassionate person, and to be grounded in the realities of the here and now - these were the elements of a meditative practice and a mindful way of being.

**Juxtaposition of meditative and non-meditative mindfulness.** His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (Gyatso, 2005) regarded meditation as an “experience of attending to the mere present [that] is a very helpful practice. The focus of this practice was a sustained training to cultivate the ability to hold the mind undistracted on the immediate, subjective experience of consciousness” (p. 160). The Dalai Lama is a proponent of scientific studies that would empirically prove the benefits of meditative mindfulness practice and conscious awareness.

Beginning in the 1980s, there was a “convergence of two different epistemologies and cultures, namely that of science and that of the contemplative disciplines”, particularly Buddhist meditative practices (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3). Williams and Kabat-Zinn argued that because:

Buddhist meditative practices are concerned with embodied awareness and the cultivation of clarity, emotional balance (equanimity) and compassion, and since all of these capacities can be refined and developed via the honing and intentional deployment of attention, the roots of

Buddhist meditation are de facto universal. (p. 2)

Thus, as Kabat-Zinn (2011) maintained, it is appropriate “to introduce these practices into mainstream secular settings in the service of helping to reduce suffering and the attendant mind-states and behaviors that compound it” (p. 4). Williams and Kabat-Zinn asserted that:

the emergence within science and medicine of interest in Buddhist meditative practices and their potential applications represents a convergence of two different ways of knowing, that of western empirical science, and that of the empiricism of the meditative or consciousness disciplines and their attendant mindfulness.... The promise of deepened insights and novel approaches to theoretical and practical issues is great when different lenses can be held up to old and intractable issues.... (p. 3)

From the lens of meditative mindfulness, Marturano, Gonzales, and Carroll wrote popular practical guides to provide one perspective of mindful leadership. While these books were useful in suggesting ways in which leaders could become more mindful, they were not grounded in scholarly research. Instead, these writers focused on the meditative mindfulness training of leaders and their development of trait characteristics. The other perspective of mindful leadership presented in the literature was an empirical concept that involved a non-meditative, mental process of noticing that allowed for creating novel distinctions and new categories of information (Langer, 2005).

### **Mindful Leadership Based On a Non-meditative Mindfulness Process**

There are several theorists who conducted academic research on the application of a non-meditative process of mindfulness to leadership. These theorists posited mindfulness as an attentional focus that leaders could draw upon to enhance creativity and promote intentional change (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Langer, 1989, 2005). Seiling and Hinrichs (2005) described



this attentional process as purposeful noticing, or calling forth your capacity to be attentive. By paying particular attention, a mindful leader was intentionally alert and open to whatever circumstances or situations might arise (Langer, 1997). Delizonna, Williams, and Langer (2009) explained mindfulness as the process of actively noticing new things or creating novel distinctions. Their research findings showed that mindfulness improved performance, relationship satisfaction, creativity, and health. Weick (2006) described mindfulness as learning to switch modes of thinking from noticing new things that involved both seeing similarities in things thought of as being different to seeing differences in things thought of as being similar.

Ucok (2007) outlined a five-step inquiry-based process to develop mindfulness by being attentive to an experience as it unfolded and then letting go of the thought or feeling associated with it. Ucok's (2007) study offered insight into how a leader assisted others in using mindful training. Mindfulness occurred through facilitated interaction focused on accepting and exploring thoughts or emotions, letting go, and being present. Ucok provided insight into processes - inquiry and reflection - that leaders could use to help others be mindful.

Ritchie-Dunham (2014) offered an organizational perspective for mindful leadership that integrated a systemic and systematic process that contained three components: thinking (ongoing alertness), relating (healthy human interactions), and intention (clear incentives and action plans). The strategic goal was to promote a distributed mindfulness throughout the organization. Change is constant, so the role of a mindful leader was to acknowledge impermanence and prepare the people within the organization to deal and work effectively with uncertainty and the challenges that accompany it. Ritchie-Dunham noted that:

mindful leadership is about mindful process.... These strategic processes attempt to guide large parts of the organization in recognizing new categories (business opportunities and

threats), responding to the emergence of new perspectives (stakeholders), and processing new information (feedback from the marketplace), showing how to avoid dangers not yet arisen. (p. 445)

When a leader engaged in processes that addressed uncertainty, he or she was more apt to be open to evolving conditions and circumstances and less authoritarian and fixed on existing and outdated practices (Langer, 1989). Research showed that the mindful leader was more receptive to divergent perspectives and respectful of their followers and, thus was seen as more authentic and trustworthy (Langer, 1989). In an organization that had a mindful culture, there was decreased employee absenteeism and increased production (Langer, 1997). Therefore, mindful leadership “increases organizational innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness” (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014, p. 445). Mindful leaders, who embraced uncertainty, were alert to the current reality of the situation, were sensitive to the emerging aspects that were presented, and were attentive to different perspectives which allowed them to provide “in-the-moment interventions” and work toward “building shared understandings to enable change” (Dunoon & Langer, 2011, p. 2).

Whether one spoke of mindfulness *practice* or *process*, it was clear that both were instrumental in gaining a deeper awareness of self and others, and useful in dealing with uncertainty. In the next part, I review the educational leadership literature to find the theoretical underpinnings for the framework of mindful leadership.

### **The Theoretical Underpinnings of Transformational, Servant, and Authentic Leadership In The Framework of Mindful Leadership**

From a review of the educational leadership literature, it was apparent that there were aspects of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that provided theoretical underpinnings for mindful leadership. I chose these three approaches to leadership because I contend that they provide the intrapersonal, relational, and developmental foundations for the

framework of mindful leadership. Part two provides a brief overview of these elements of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that I propose were underpinnings for the mindful leadership framework.

Each decade of social change directly influenced the meaning and altered the definition of leadership (Rost, 1991). To provide contemporary and contextual relevance, behavioral qualifiers like “transformational” (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Downton, 1973; Kouzes & Posner, 1987, 2002), “servant” (Greenleaf, 1970, 1972, 1977), “authentic” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Eagly, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008;), and “mindful” (Carroll, 2007; Dunoon & Langer, 2011; Gonzales, 2012; Marturano, 2014; Ritchie-Dunham, 2014; Ucock, 2007) were applied to the notion of leadership in an attempt to bring clarity to its process, concepts, and values. Northouse (2013) observed that this new leadership paradigm (that includes transformational, servant, and authentic) focused more on “the affective components of leadership such as intrinsic motivation and follower development” which addressed the needs of today’s workforce who wanted to be “inspired and empowered to succeed in times of uncertainty” (p. 185). Mindful leadership, in my view, would be similarly situated within this new leadership paradigm because it also focuses on the affective components of leadership such as self and relational awareness that support individuals within the organization to reach their fullest potential and be successful in periods of uncertainty.

These three leadership conceptualizations - transformational, servant, and authentic are grounded in states of awareness, engagement, connection, and actualization. I propose that they are the leadership conceptualizations most relevant to mindfulness as it relates to leadership because they focus on internal and external awareness as well as relationship building, and

support the self-development of others. These states open new understandings of self, other, and organization while cultivating purpose and possibility. However, the present state of “economic and resource constraints” and rapid change generate overload and disconnection that require a new kind of leadership that is further attuned and skilled in dealing effectively with overwhelming anxiety, stress, and isolation (Dunoon & Langer, 2011; Marturano, 2014, p. 8). Carroll (2007), Dunoon and Langer (2011), Gonzales (2012), and Marturano (2014) argued that today’s organizations need mindful leaders who are able to deal with the increasing stresses of a demanding work environment. There was general agreement that mindful leaders have the clarity, focus, and equanimity that are necessary to handle current unstable and demanding work environments. Within the conceptual framework of mindful leadership are aspects of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that provide the foundational underpinnings of these self and relational states.

### **Aspects of Transformational Leadership**

In Burn’s (1978) depiction of transformational leadership, the leader engaged with followers and created a connection that heightened the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. Transformational leadership and mindful leadership are similar in that both types of leaders are “attentive to the needs and motives of followers” and try to “help followers reach their fullest potential” (Northouse, p. 186). Bass (1985) argued that transformational leadership:

motivates followers to do more than expected by (a) raising followers’ levels of consciousness about the importance and value of specified and idealized goals, (b) getting followers to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the team or organization, and (c) moving followers to address higher level needs. (p. 190)

Transformational leaders were considered to be “change agents” with the ability to “articulate a clear vision” and “empower followers to meet higher standards” while also creating a meaningful purpose within the organization (p. 214). Besides inspiring followers to achieve organizational goals, transformational leaders also assisted them in becoming “fully actualized” and in fulfilling their individual potential (Northouse, 2013, p. 193).

### **Aspects of Servant Leadership**

Greenleaf’s (1970) conceptualization of servant leadership also had a goal of helping followers realize their potential and achieve greater self-actualization. A core commitment of servant leadership was to nurture and empower people in the organization to grow personally as well as professionally. Like mindful leaders, servant leaders had acute awareness of themselves and others and were concerned about others’ wellbeing. These leaders built a caring, trusting community by creating a safe environment where people feel a sense of connectedness.

### **Aspects of Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leaders also had a genuine desire to serve others and build trusting relationships (George, 2003; George & Sims, 2007). Walumbwa et al. (2008) defined authentic leadership as: a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities [such as confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience] and positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (p. 94)

This self and relational awareness, balanced processing of information, and positive self-development is also evident in mindful leadership.

Authentic leadership was viewed from three main perspectives: intrapersonal (Shamir &

Eilam, 2005), interpersonal (Eagly, 2005), and developmental (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Intrapersonal referred to a leader's "self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept" (Northouse, p. 254). Interpersonal referred to the collective relational and reciprocal processes between the leader and followers. Developmental referred to "something that can be nurtured" and developed over a period of time "rather than a fixed trait" (p. 254). Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) discussed the impact of authenticity in terms of happiness and wellbeing. These researchers proposed that mindful leadership would have a positive impact on wellbeing. Like mindful leadership, authentic leadership was affected by critical life experiences that acted as catalysts for change. These experiences were either positive or negative but as leaders reflected on their life stories and shared them with others, they reached a greater understanding of self, both in a personal and a professional sense, and gained clarity, self-knowledge, and insight (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

In summation, I propose that there are theoretical underpinnings of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that provide a framework for mindful leadership. Those three forms of leadership were very prevalent in the academic leadership literature surrounding educational leadership. From an institutional viewpoint, what is missing is a conceptualization of the self and relational awareness orientations of mindful educational leadership.

### **Conceptualization of Mindful Educational Leadership**

A conceptualization of mindful educational leadership was derived from the findings in parts one and two of this chapter. I begin by highlighting the meditative and non-meditative elements of mindfulness with regard to *self* and *others*. Next, I recap the intrapersonal, relational, and developmental underpinnings of transformational, servant, and authentic educational leaderships that provide a framework for mindful leadership. Then, I incorporate these pieces to provide a

conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. What follows is a table that summarizes the meditative *practice* and non-meditative *process* of mindfulness that were found in the literature.

**Mindfulness**

Table 1

Summary of Meditative and Non-meditative Elements of Mindfulness

<u>Meditative Practice</u>	<u>Non-meditative Process</u>
<p><u>Self:</u> self-aware, self-knowledge, non-judgmental, fully present, open-minded, open-hearted, clarity, focus, attentive to actual reality, calm, equanimity, grounded, selfless, humble, patient, confident, compassionate, courageous in addressing tough issues, creative, positive.</p>	<p>attentive, alert, discerning, purposeful noticing, open, clear focus on reality, accepting and letting go of thoughts and emotions, actively noticing new things or creating novel distinctions.</p>
<p><u>Others:</u> empathic, attuned to others, building trusting relationships and connectedness, collaborative, impeccable.</p>	<p>healthy human interactions, receptive and respectful of divergent perspectives.</p>
<p><u>Meditative Leadership Practice</u> support others to become mindful</p>	<p><u>Non-meditative Leadership Process</u> promote distributed mindfulness throughout the organization</p>
<p>(Carroll, 2007; Gonzales, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 1994; Marturano, 2012; Williams &amp; Kabat-Zinn, 2011).</p>	<p>(Delizonna, Williams &amp; Langer, 2009; Dunoon &amp; Langer, 2011; Langer, 1989, 2005; Seiling &amp; Hinrichs, 2005; Ucok, 2007).</p>

## **Intrapersonal, Relational, and Developmental Components of Transformational, Servant, and Authentic Leadership**

Within transformational, servant, and authentic leaderships there were three components – intrapersonal, relational, and developmental that provided a framework for the conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. Following is a brief summary of these foundational supports with regard to self and others:

### 1. Transformational leadership

a) *Self* – self-understanding and knowledge; sense of self and a positive self-regard; awareness of self-competencies; self-determined sense of identity; confident and competent; moral (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988; Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

b) *Others* (relational) – attentive to needs and growth of followers; engages with followers; creates a connection with followers; builds trust and fosters collaboration with others; encourages others and celebrates their accomplishments; listens to followers and is open to opposing viewpoints; inspires and motivates others to achieve organizational goals; helps followers reach their fullest potential; advocates change and positive transformation of others so they will feel better about themselves (Northouse, 2013, pp. 197-201).

### 2. Servant leadership

a) *Self* – self-awareness; self-understanding and understanding of the impact one has on others; empathic; self-less, caring, nurturing; ethical; self-actualization (Greenleaf, 1970, 1972, 1977).

b) *Others* (relational) – attentive to the concerns and needs of others; acutely aware of, and attuned to others; serves followers, puts followers first, empowers them, and helps them develop their full personal capacities; cares about the personal wellbeing of their followers; builds a safe



and trusting community environment so people will feel a sense of connection, relatedness, and attunement to others; serves followers, puts followers first, empowers them, and helps them develop their full personal capacities; cares about the personal well being of their followers; (Northouse, 2013, pp. 219-223).

### 3. Authentic Leadership

a) *Self* - self-knowledge, self-regulation (internalized moral perspective), self-development, and self-concept; self-awareness; genuine; balanced processing of information; confident, hopeful, optimistic, and resilient; compassionate, open and honest (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Gardner et al., 2005; George, 2003; George & Sims, 2007; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

b) *Others* (relational) - serve and work with others; nurture and help others in their self-development; relational transparency; establish trusting relationships with others; reciprocity between leaders and followers, leaders affect followers and followers affect leaders (Northouse, 2013, pp. 254-266).

By incorporating the meditative *practice* and non-meditative *process* of mindfulness with these components of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, I arrived at the foundational elements of mindful educational leadership that included: self and other (relational) awareness, attunement, openness, discernment, compassion, and connectedness.

### **Operational Definition of Mindful Educational Leadership**

Drawing from the relevant literature findings on mindful, transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership was emerging. For the purposes of this dissertation, mindful educational leadership, as mentioned in Chapter One, is the embodiment of the states of internal (self) and external (relational) awareness that include

openness (which refers to receptively viewing the world without preconception, predisposition, or preference) and acceptance (which means the cognizance of differences). In addition, there is a belief that each person brings a unique and valued perspective as well as the capacity to selflessly and compassionately connect with others in a desire to nurture their highest potential. An educational leader's mindful state provides a deep awareness of self and others, a capacity to witness without judgment and discern events as they occur, and a selfless engagement that is both compassionate and purposeful.

### **Description of a Mindful Educational Leader**

A mindful educational leader is someone who purposefully engages in self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of herself or himself. Understanding one's self increases self-awareness and the impact that one has on others (Carroll, 2007). Paying attention and being alert in the present moment (which is a key element of mindfulness) enhances an educational leader's capacity to notice and discern what is happening in the current situation. An ability to acknowledge thoughts and emotions and let them go is both a mental *practice* and *process* that enables a leader to obtain clarity and focus on the matters at hand (Carroll, 2007; Marturano, 2012). Through a concerted practice that clears the mind and focuses on deep breathing techniques, a leader is then able to reach a place of calmness and equanimity.

This heightened self-awareness, clarity, focus, and calmness provides the foundation for an educational leader's relational awareness, attunement, and openness. A mindful educational leader is someone who is acutely aware, attentive, and attuned to others' needs. Because she or he is nonjudgmental and open, there is a receptiveness to and respect of divergent perspectives that help to build trust and connectedness (Langer, 1989). Such a leader authentically engages and nurtures others in their self-development and realization of their full potentials (Carroll,

2007). A mindful educational leader selflessly and compassionately connects with others in a desire to bring about the best in them and achieve their self-actualizations.

When educational leaders learn to be more presently aware and attuned to themselves and others, they are “able to accept uncertainty, ambiguity, and challenges with less inner turmoil” (Olsen & Brown, 2012, p. 2). Olson and Brown (2012) suggested that school leaders “who practice mindfulness can serve as inspirational role models for their ability to build emotional and social intelligence” (p. 2). Mindful educational leaders “bring richness and depth to their roles making schools more effective, supporting their teachers better, and giving students the skills [that are necessary]... to interact with the complex world outside the school door” (p. 2). Olson and Brown argued, “that at a time when school leaders are facing endless demands, mindful leadership can provide a path to a healthier and more productive school environment” (p. 1). Educational leaders, who were self and relationally aware and who had clarity, focus, discernment, and composure, were better able to confront the challenges and difficulties of leading and instructing. A mindfulness practice that encompassed both meditative and non-meditative techniques for “calm reflection, pausing, and noticing” was central to “staying focused in work, tapping into creativity, and providing a sense of possibility” and potential that was useful for positive personal and professional leadership development (p. 1).

This conceptualization of mindful educational leadership is in its initial stage of depiction. Mindful educational leadership has significant implications for the field of educational leadership and the broader leadership field. Because this construct is in its formative stages of conceptualization it requires additional clarity and opens the possibility for further research.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I reviewed the literature on mindful leadership and related its dual concept of

meditative mindfulness *practice* and non-meditative mindfulness *process* to three forms of leadership - transformational, servant, and authentic - in constructing the concept of mindful educational leadership. I examined the work that was published on mindful leadership (based on a meditative practice) and its characteristics and attributes. Then, I provided an overview of the literature that offered the contemplative guidance for the meditative practice that was utilized in this research study. This was followed by a synopsis of the juxtaposition of meditative and non-meditative mindfulness. Next, I perused the literature on mindful leadership based on a non-meditative mindfulness process. After that, I explored the theoretical underpinnings of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that, in my view, provided the framework for mindful leadership. I then offered an operational definition of mindful educational leadership followed by a description of a mindful educational leader. I ended with the proposition that mindfulness is a meaningful and useful construct in educational leadership. Thus, in Chapter Two, I provided a review of the expert knowledge in the literature that laid the foundation for the academic substantiation that is embedded within the Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) methodology explicated in Chapter Three.

## **Chapter 3: Scholarly Personal Narrative Methodology**

### **Genesis**

Attempting to write about mindfulness in an academic and conceptual manner was in some ways incompatible with its very nature, which is essentially an experiential process. Shapiro and Carlson (2009) maintained that if mindfulness was to become a meaningful construct, researchers needed to find ways of “translating its ‘nonconceptual, nondual, and paradoxical nature’ into a language that not only clinicians, scientists, and scholars, but in fact everyone can understand and agree on” (p. 147). I chose Scholarly Personal Narrative as the methodology to inform and support critical reflection on, as well as an examination of, my experiences with mindfulness and leadership. This methodology provided a narrative exploration of my topic. In addition, I was able to draw on relevant, pre-existing research and scholarship in order to ground and enrich my story of personal and professional experiences in the hope that it would be useful to other educational leaders. What follows is an explanation of Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013), a description of its situation within the narrative genre, and my rationale for selecting this methodology. I then outline the methods of data collection that were used in my research study.

### **Scholarly Personal Narrative**

For me, the most challenging part of this research was finding a methodology that provided the use of a personal narrative that constructed meaning through both the head and the heart. I am a poet, a storyteller, and an educator. I endeavoured to examine my educational leadership and mindfulness journeys within the convergence of my self-identities through the use of a methodology that offered both scholarly rigor and narrative expression. Finally, late one night, as I sat at my computer searching and thinking about the type of methodology that would give

authentic voice and legitimacy to my research, I discovered Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013). As I began reading about this qualitative research genre and its creator, Dr. Robert J. Nash, I knew without a doubt that it was the right methodology for my dissertation topic.

### **The Essence**

As defined by Nash and Viray (2013), Scholarly Personal Narrative is a “narrative self-interrogation” (p. 36). The etymologies of the word “narrative” refer to the ancient Sanskrit “gna” which means “to know” and the Latin root, “narro” which is “to tell”. A narrative is a way of knowing and telling, not only what a writer has experienced but also, what she has learned from her experience. A self-interrogative narrative is a way to make sense of who the writer is, what she stands for, and what gives meaning to her life. It is also a way to come to terms with her experiences and the crucial situations in her life that confront, confound, activate, and teach. Through this self-examination, she has a deeper understanding of her authentic self. By bearing witness to the writer’s experiences and sharing her stories, she creates a connection that has the potential, according to Nash and Viray, to “captivate, inspire, and motivate” others to reflect on their own personal and professional life experiences (p. 59).

### **Explication**

Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) is a self-reflective examination that starts with the life of the writer, continues onward with a thematic investigation of crucial life experiences that have a transformative personal impact, and ends with the identification of generalizable themes that have applicability for the reader in a qualitative sense. By applicability, I mean that the themes have relevance not only to the reader, but to a wider audience as well. With regard to a qualitative sense, I mean that although the

findings and the story are not generalizable to population as in the case of statistical findings in a quantitative sense, it is the reader who will determine if the narrative is applicable in whole or in part to her or his own situation, circumstances, and hence generalizable in so far as the particular individual is concerned. This is similar to the applicability of a parable's application to a general audience. It is the reader who determines whether the narrative story is generalizable.

According to Nash and Bradley (2011), Scholarly Personal Narrative has four main foundational components:

(1) the identification of key themes; (2) the connection of these key themes to the writer's personal stories in order to exemplify and explicate the points being made; (3) the inclusion of relevant, pre-existing research and scholarship in order to ground and enrich the personal narrative; and, (4) the application of universalizable ideas with the intent of connecting with the readers in some meaningful, relevant, and compelling ways. (p. 152)

Although I agree with Nash that a personal narrative has the potential to offer meaning and relevance, I disagree with his use of the term, "universalizability". In my view, this term refers to a rather grand claim that I contend overstates its reach. Instead, for the purpose of my Scholarly Personal Narrative study, I use the term "applicability" (by that I mean commonality, relevance, and resonance), instead of "universalizability".

It is through this applicability, that Scholarly Personal Narrative aims to "teach others by conveying both personal and intellectual meanings to its readers" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 11). A person's crucible experiences have the potential for learning and growth, not only for the individual's personal development but also to inspire and motivate others to seek transformation through self-reflection in order to have a more meaningful life. No matter how diverse human beings are, they possess certain commonalities such as a search for meaning in their lives and a

desire to make connections with others. Locating these connections and these common bonds is part of the applicability process of Scholarly Personal Narrative. Nash and Viray maintained that this methodology promotes:

understanding the subjective experiences of individuals from their own lens. It is about providing intellectually discursive space for the pursuit of new meaning and understanding. SPN is about redefining scholarship and broadening the scope.... It is a journey of the self, an analytical and personal account of one's own story. It is a systematic inquiry into self, and an examination of self in relation to others. (p. 121)

Scholarly Personal Narrative uses the writer's narrative of her crucible life experiences as a "form of teaching, informing, advocating, and transforming. It requires that the author's narrative be central to the applicable themes discussed and be interwoven with existing literature that echoes the honesty in their truth" (p. 15). One of the major purposes of the Scholarly Personal Narrative writer is "to present an alternative perspective on the world, and then to suggest the possible, generalizable implications of that perspective for the rest of us on how to live a life of meaning and purpose" (p. 52).

The Scholarly Personal Narrative researcher "serves as the primary subject of the study" (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 154). Scholars are always an integral part of what they "observe, study, interpret and assert" and therefore "can never fully remove themselves from academic subjectivity" (p. 17). Nash and Bradley (2011) argued that Scholarly Personal Narrative facilitates the "merging of personal narrative with scholarly meaning making; joining the narrative voice with academic rigor and research" (p. 24). They proposed that Bruner's (1990) conceptualization of "the mind as a creator of narrative meanings affirms the intellectual value of SPN" (p. 19). In addition, there is "a deep engagement of the head and heart for passion,



conviction, perspective, and understanding” (Nash & Bradley, p. 60). A reader of a personal narrative that draws from the head and the heart gains a deeper understanding of who the writer is and what she stands for. Her story illuminates her personal sense of meaning making.

Scholarly Personal Narrative gives the researcher-writer the opportunity to be open to what her crucible experiences are saying about herself, her life, and her relationships with others. The knowledge gained from this honest introspection can then be applied to the larger world in order to help others, if they are receptive to it, come to terms with their truth and find meaning in their life stories. This in turn engages the reader to become reflective of her or his personal and relational experiences.

### **Situation Within the Personal Narrative Genre**

Nash (2004) suggested that Scholarly Personal Narrative has similarities and overlaps with other personal narrative methodologies including memoir, autobiography, and auto-ethnography. What these narratives have in common, according to Nash, are the following elements: “(a) they start with the self, they are self-clarifying and constructing; (b) they tell stories; (c) they make sense and meaning of personal experiences; and, (d) they are written in a clearly distinctive and authentic voice” (p. 30). Nash asserted that Scholarly Personal Narrative differs from the work of memoir, autobiography, and auto-ethnography because it “intentionally organizes around themes, issues, constructs, and concepts that carry larger, more universalizable meanings for readers” (p. 30).

Specifically, Scholarly Personal Narrative differs from a memoir in formality and scholarship. A memoir is more informal and relies on the writer’s memory to make sense of day-to-day experiences, whereas according to Nash and Bradley (2011), Scholarly Personal Narrative “makes an explicit effort to identify larger themes and insights that might be

universalizable and connect those themes to both the non-academic and academic writings of others to provide important background ideas for the reader” (p. 16). Scholarly Personal Narrative writers use the “events and people in their lives to exemplify and explain the larger ideas, concepts, and constructs that bind together human beings everywhere in spite of their differences” (p. 16). Nash and Viray (2013) contended that Scholarly Personal Narrative is different from an autobiography in that an autobiography is more “chronological and linear in structure and format” as well as “more historical and sweeping” (p. 46). In contrast, Scholarly Personal Narrative is more selective and focused. With auto-ethnography, the focus is on the self’s ongoing relationship with the culture and is therefore grounded in ethnographic (anthropological) analysis and interpretation. Nash and Viray argued that Scholarly Personal Narrative, on the other hand, is “unconstrained by any specific research method or perspective” (p. 46). Nash (2004) maintained that, “SPN is a scholarly methodology which stands on its own as a genre, beyond any need to conflate it with an ethnographic approach” (p. 162).

Nash stated that the Scholarly Personal Narrative writer needed to focus on three key inquiries:

- (a) What relevance does my story have to readers?
- (b) What are the take-aways that will benefit my reader’s personal and professional lives?
- (c) How can I make my story resonate in some way with all the varied, unique stories that my readers will bring to my text? (p. 17)

Scholarly Personal Narrative is “self-infused scholarship that is central to academic writing. It is as much introspection as extrospection” (p. 17). It combines “scholarship and story, general and particular, abstract and concrete, theoretical and down-to-earth; demonstrating depth of knowledge of the literature field, illustrating the requisite analytical skills of the discipline, and

providing compelling universalizable meanings and applications for readers” (p. 17). Scholarly Personal Narrative is a way of signifying and making meaning of life’s experiences.

This methodology provides a meaningful way of making sense of profound experiences. There are two goals of Scholarly Personal Narrative: first, to use one’s life experience to identify key themes which have applicability, meaning that there is “extension, commonality, consensus, and relevance” to the reader; and second, to embed relevant, scholarly research within the personal narrative to substantiate and enhance it (Nash, 2004, p. 161). Scholarly Personal Narrative offers both a scholarly investigation and a personal narrative with the potential of increased self-awareness and awareness of others, because it provides a deeper understanding and insight into one’s self and one’s self in relation to others which is crucial to leadership as it is inherently relational by nature.

### **Rationale for Choosing Scholarly Personal Narrative**

I chose this methodology because of its conscious exploration of the interaction between the self and the relationship of self to others through a purposeful process of analysis. I believe that through Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013), I increased my self-awareness as well as my understanding of others’ needs within the context of my professional and personal experiences. This methodology enabled me to enter into a self-examination and reflective process which in turn provided a storied narrative to others who wish to enter into the journey of educational leadership and who are seeking ways to effectively deal with the challenging experiences of administrative life.

In my view, a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology provided the best way to recount those crucible experiences in my life which had motivated a desire to have a mindful practice that created a deeper awareness of self and others. I contend that Scholarly Personal Narrative

(Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) allowed me to personally and meaningfully engage in an analysis of my research topic through an introspective process. This reflective investigation was a way of entering my life experience to find meaning and purpose in a deeper sense of self and relational awareness. Moreover, I believe that this dual sense of mindful awareness impacts leaders and hence leadership. An experiential narrative about mindfulness and mindful leadership conveys the meanings that the writer has discovered and invites the reader to enter and feel a part of the experiences and understandings (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). According to Ellis and Bochner, the communication of these acts of meaning compels us:

to produce narrative, evocative, dialogic texts that show human beings, including ourselves, in the process of creating, negotiating and performing meaning in a world of others, making our way through a world that poses obstacles, interruptions, contingencies, turning points, epiphanies, and moral choices. (p. 748)

I believe that the best way to connect with my readers is to tell stories. Stories are the common experience we all share, no matter how diverse we might be. From my experience, there is no better way for me to articulate my points and to draw conclusions than to frame them with my personal narrative. Furthermore, Nash (2004) argued that there is a common need that everyone shares, to have their stories matter, to signify their experiences, and to validate themselves. In the end, the self is an interwoven tapestry of life experiences - difficulties, desires, and dreams (Freeman, 1993; Kerby, 1991). What connects us to each other are the shared vulnerabilities found within our stories.

By writing about my own experiences, I brought “legitimacy to my personal story and value to the academic community” by adding depth to the conceptualization of mindfulness and

breadth to a scholarly investigation of mindful educational leadership (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 13). Scholarly Personal Narrative allowed me “to create new scholarship that lies symbiotically with the traditionally accepted scholarship of academia” (p. 13). It is my hope that this study offers a meaningful academic contribution that will build upon the existing research in the field of educational leadership.

Narrative has become a strongly supported methodology, especially in the field of education (Bruner, 1996; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, 2000; Eisner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that narrative is “a way of understanding experience” (p. xxv). Bruner (1996) argued that, “we live most of our lives in a world constructed according to the rules and devices of narrative. Surely education could provide richer opportunities than it does for creating the metacognitive sensitivity needed for coping with the world of narrative reality and its competing claims” (p. 149). Polkinghorne (1988) declared that, “narrative is a foundational structure of comprehension” (p. 15). Stories provide a way to capture the complexity and interconnectedness in our lives in order to understand what has happened and make sense of it. Through narrative, experience is brought to life and a human connection is forged. An individual shares her life experiences through the stories she tells. Nash and Viray asserted that a narrative is “what binds us together, is the universality of our questions, the commonality of our needs, and our desire to have lives that matter” (p. 67).

Even though there is strong support for the utilization of narrative as a methodology, I am cognizant that there may be academic concerns about the use of Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013). Since this methodology is a personal narrative, it might be viewed as an inappropriate form of research because it is by its nature not neutral or objective; and therefore, it might be considered a narcissistic essay with no legitimacy

within the academy. To respond to this view, I argue that personal narrative is self-disclosing rather than self-indulgent. Stories do not simply describe the self; they are the self's expression of being. The intention of my research study was not to be self-serving or feed some egotistical desire. As I approached each day of reading and writing, I did so with humility and a sense of reverence for the subject of mindfulness. I say reverence because even though this was a scholarly investigation, it was also a soul endeavour. My aim was to find meaning in my professional and personal experiences, a meaning that could be shared with my readers as a way to invite them to reflect on the insights gained from my head, heart, and spirit, as well as to evoke thoughtful consideration of their own life experiences in order to see if anything related or was resonant on some level.

I contend along with Nash (2004) that there is “validity in incorporating [the personal narratives of] ourselves into the dominant scholarly discourse”, particularly in the education field (p. 4). The ultimate intellectual responsibility of the Scholarly Personal Narrative scholar is to find a way to use “the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers” (p. 4). Ellis and Bochner (2000) maintained that it is important to offer an alternative form of expression within the academy which allows readers “to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points” of life experiences and “consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling” (p. 735). This is what validates and signifies the human experience. Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo (2009) argued that there is a need in the academy for personal narrative that is “educative and reflective, mirroring the author's life through his or her own past histories and stories” (p. 66). I argue that Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, and Leggo's assertion is particularly valid and significant within faculties of education where there is ongoing encouragement for reflective inquiry and practice (Schon,

1983). My Scholarly Personal Narrative captured the robust complexity of awareness and understanding that came from the self-reflections that were included in the data from my professional educational experiences and my personal life-changing struggles.

### **Data Collection**

The data that was gathered included epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts. The strategies that I used to gain clarity and focus to assist me in the data collection process of the research included insight meditation, Hatha yoga, and music. I provide an overview of this data followed by a commentary on the methodological contextualization.

### **Strategies**

I used insight meditation as a strategy to achieve and support a mindful inquiry in the data collection process (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Insight meditation is the cultivation of attention and a “specific nonjudgmental awareness of present-moment stimuli without cognitive elaboration” (Goldstein & Kornfield, 1987, p. 6). It offered psychological and spiritual insights, a depth of awareness, inner peace, and a profound and liberating sense of present moment reality (Titmuss, 2009). Chah (1985) wrote, “the great meditation masters spoke about the truth within oneself” (1985, p. 10). Accessing this truth came through self-investigation and introspection that led to insight and wisdom (Chah, Breiter, & Kornfield, 1985). In Chapter Eight there is a further explanation of insight meditation, with its purpose and benefits in order to demonstrate its use as a strategy. I used meditation to help me cultivate mindful insight as I conducted my research. Along with meditation, I also did Hatha yoga to provide an embodied awareness during this process. I had music as a background aesthetic to aid in the meditation. Additional clarification of these strategies of Hatha yoga and music is included in Chapter Eight. Once the mindful

research inquiry was complete and the data was collected, it was then examined for key themes and applicable meanings.

## **Methods**

The collection of data included: epistolary letters (which are personal missives that reveal thoughts, observations, and perspectives) that add to the original text (Nash & Bradley, 2011), journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts (renderings of my life observations and experiences). This was followed by a data analysis for the purpose of identification of key themes (Nash, 2004). Epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts provided an exploration of recollections of past events and situations (Chang, 2008) that led me to undertake this study. Past events included my previous educational leadership experiences and my other crucible life experiences of battling breast cancer and recovering from the devastation of the 2013 flood.

My data recollections chronicled my educational leadership experiences that were the impetus for a more aware and meaningful professional practice and they entailed my further understanding of leadership and administration as a practicing administrator. They also included the personal challenges that brought me to a mindfulness practice. In the epistolary letters, I recorded observations, thoughts, perspectives, and feelings of key educational leadership experiences - teacher-leader, leading education learner, administrator, as well as administrator-learner (who is engaged in further study of leadership and administration). My administrative experiences spoke first of my role as an administrator and chair of a three-year action research project designed to personally connect and engage with at-risk high school students in a small rural school, and second, of my role as a new administrator in a rural elementary school where I was intent on building meaningful relationships with staff, students, and parents. During that



time, I was also engaged in the further study of leadership and administration for the fulfillment of a Master's degree. After the completion of that degree, I decided to continue to explore leadership and enrolled in another graduate course at the University of Calgary, entitled, *Spirituality and Inspired Leadership*, taught by Dr. David C. Jones. While I was taking those classes, I wrote journal reflections on leadership, pieces of which I included in the text of my Scholarly Personal Narrative.

Within my Scholarly Personal Narrative were embedded poetic life texts. In the narrative and texts, I wrote about the personal crises - of breast cancer and the devastation of my home and loss of belongings due to a flood - that helped me develop the mindful practice that I intended to apply to my educational leadership. The epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts were the data that I examined to identify key themes that suggested implications for what it means to be a mindful educational leader and its applications to the broader field of educational leadership and the institution of education.

As an individual navigates through life with all of its obstacles and turning points, she comes to understand the complexities of her existence. She realizes that her ongoing struggle to make sense of her experiences has changed her over time. She develops a deeper awareness of herself, her relationships, of her situatedness, and of her areas for growth. She learns that this is the essence of coming to terms with being human. This understanding can then be shared with others through narratives. Bochner (2000) suggested that:

storytelling can be used as a method for inviting readers to put themselves in our place. The usefulness of these stories is their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of the readers, who enter from the perspective of their own lives. The narrative rises and falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own

experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints. (p. 748)

My Scholarly Personal Narrative is an invitation for the reader to ponder her or his personal and professional experiences in relation to the researcher's.

### **Methodological Contextualization**

To write a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) required the dual identities of scholar and reflective participant. Researchers contextualize their personal experiences and standpoints in their research by narrating a story about themselves and using personal knowledge to assist them in the research process (Jones, 1998; Lincoln, 1992). Ellis and Bochner (2000) claimed that social scientists “have begun to view themselves as the phenomenon and to write evocative personal narratives” that are “focused on their academic as well as their personal lives” (pp. 741-742). Readers are invited to become more active participants, to connect to the author's experiences through an evocative response to the events being described and asked to reflect on what they learned to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of their own lives. The goal of a Scholarly Personal Narrative is to write meaningfully and evocatively about a topic that matters and might make an impact (Denzin, 1997; Richardson, 1997). Lopate (1994) referred to the personal essay as neither science nor philosophy but rather, as “something akin to basic research on the self that ends up as a ‘mode of being’” (p. xlv). The same can be said for Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) because it is an existential struggle for a better way of being in an uncertain world.

This methodology offered the benefit of moving between narrative and categorical

knowledge that provided an intersection of story with an analytical frame. As the writer and reader learned how to open themselves to the experience that was being narrated and reflected on its significance, they would reach a higher level of consciousness and engagement. Scholarly Personal Narrative allowed me to start my interrogation with self-introspection, then to identify and uncover the applicable themes. By exploring the particularities of my life, I believe that I broadened my understanding of mindfulness and leadership. This methodology explored and narrated my professional and personal crucible experiences; detailed its turning points, uncovered its shifts in perspective, and provided a textual way of knowing.

### **Summary**

As a poet, storyteller, and educator, I chose a Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology because it was a way to construct meaning through the head and the heart. It provided both academic rigor and narrative expression. It offered a way of comprehending experiential knowledge through a narrative of self-interrogation that was grounded in relevant, pre-existing research and scholarship. Scholarly Personal Narrative conveyed both personal and intellectual meanings through my stories of crucible life experiences that I shared with the reader.

Meaning was gained through a self-introspection that started with my personal and professional life experiences that were then examined for themes. The identification of key themes that were generalized had broader applications. This purposeful organization around themes that carried larger, applicable meanings was what distinguished my Scholarly Personal Narrative from other personal narrative methodologies such as memoir, autobiography, and auto-ethnography.

I used insight meditation as a strategy to achieve and support a mindful inquiry during the data collection process. Along with insight meditation, I did Hatha yoga to provide an embodied

awareness and played music as a background aesthetic to aid in the meditation. Once the mindful research inquiry was complete and the data was collected it was then examined for key themes and applicable meanings. Data collection included: epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts. I believe that Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) was the most appropriate and suitable methodology to use to explore the particularities of my crucible life experiences, and to broaden my understanding of mindfulness and leadership so that I could offer a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership.

## **Interlude**

I pause here to connect what has gone before with what is to come. The first three chapters of my dissertation were written in a format to fulfill the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education dissertation requirements. They consisted of the Foundation, Review of the Literature, and Methodology. In a pure Scholarly Personal Narrative, the dissertation would not have these three distinct chapters as a foundational framework prologue; instead, they would be integrated within the narrative. Also, a Scholarly Personal Narrative would not be written in an APA style of citation and reference but rather in a MLA format, which is considered to be less intrusive to the flow of the narrative (Nash, 2004).

The next six chapters of this dissertation are my Scholarly Personal Narrative. It is my story of developing a deeper awareness of self, others, and the situations I found myself in. It is hoped that these experiences, both professional and personal, would lead me to become a mindful educational leader who has insights to share with others.

Chapter Four tells of my professional educational leadership journey from the beginning, first as a teacher, then as a member of the inaugural L.E.A.D.S. (Leading Education and Developing Schools) program in my school division. My participation in this program inspired me to apply for an administrative position in my school. I was successful in my application and became an Assistant Principal who was also the chair of a three-year Action Research conjoint project with the University of Lethbridge. After this work, I changed administrative positions as well as school divisions, and became a Vice Principal of an elementary school. I also completed my Masters degree program in Administration and Leadership. Chapter Five narrates my crucible life experience of: being diagnosed with breast cancer; undergoing radiation treatments; and, recovering from the attendant mental anguish and physical suffering. In addition, it recalls

my discovery of the practice of mindfulness and its healing benefits. Chapter Six describes my continuing educational endeavours as a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education's Leadership program at the University of Calgary as well as another personal calamity, a flood's decimation of my home and its subsequent reconstruction, which tested my mindfulness and I believe, made it stronger. Chapter Seven relates my further inward journey of self-uncovering that I contend resulted in a deeper self-awareness and attunement. Most importantly, this chapter embodies the restoration of my true Self and the wholeness of my mind, body, and spirit connection.

After Chapter Seven, there is another Interlude to prepare the reader for the final two chapters. Chapter Eight provides the analysis of the data collected in the preceding four narrative chapters. Utilizing a parallax vantage, insights are captured in order to identify themes for applicability. Chapter Nine summarizes the findings of my Scholarly Personal Narrative and its contributions to the educational literature and the field of educational leadership.

Each chapter of this Scholarly Personal Narrative begins with an epigraph, the intention of which is to provide a consideration, a focus, or an inspiration for what follows. Additionally, within each chapter is what Nash refers to as "proof texts", scholarly references that are carefully embedded to strengthen and substantiate the narrative (2004, p. 66). The purpose of an "*apt proof text* [is to provide] a context"; it "deepens your writing, extends its implications, grounds its insights, and most of all, explicitly acknowledges the contributions of others to your thinking" (Nash, p. 66). Also interwoven within each of Chapters Four through Seven are data recollections that consist of epistolary letters that I reserved for the professional experiences, and journal reflections as well as poetic life texts that I inserted among the narrative of my personal experiences. And now to continue with the mind, body, and spirit of my mindfulness journey ...

## Chapter 4: Fall Promise

*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven....*

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

I think that there are recurrent seasons in our lives. Time periods that cycle through our existence bringing challenges, suffering, inspiration, joy, and healing. We are confronted with pain and embraced with delight during these life passages so that we can profoundly feel our humanness in all of its many manifestations. This is our education, our learning, and our growth.

My life has been blessed with these continual seasons. I have witnessed and experienced the promise of fall, the endurance of winter, the resilience of spring, and the reclamation of summer. Each life season brings lessons and gifts, tears and happiness. Throughout these periods, I have learned much about the way of the world, but perhaps more importantly, I have learned much about myself - who I am, what I believe, and what I stand for. I have learned to accept, to let go, to know what truly matters, and to embrace what is meaningful to me. I have wept for the loss of loved ones and for the loss of pieces of myself. Yet, even when the darkness has enveloped me, I have somehow found the strength to carry on. I believe that each day is a divine gift; a new beginning with vibrant possibility and marvelous potential. Even though my heart has known deep sorrow, it has also been filled with tremendous gratitude and joy. I am very grateful for the many acts of loving kindness I have received and been able to give over the years. Throughout my life, I have had a profound desire to learn as much as I can about how to live in a way that is purposeful and fulfilled.

I believe that one of my life's purposes is to teach. Even from a very young age, teaching seemed very natural to me. I remember when I was in grade three, my teacher took me aside and said that she needed to be away in the afternoon so she wanted me to start the class for her. She

asked me to begin by reading a chapter from a storybook, a routine that she did each day. Then I was to tell the students to take out their exercise books and do an assignment she left on the blackboard. She said the principal would check in and see how things were going. I was thrilled to do this for her. When the students came in after lunch, I read to them. While I was reading, the principal came to the open doorway and looked in. He observed how quiet and attentive the class was and smiled. He listened for a while longer, then turned around and silently walked away.

Over the years, I realized that my teaching occurred through a variety of “mediums.” I was a classroom teacher and taught grades one through twelve, primarily in the subject areas of English and Social Studies, although there were many other courses as well. I was a mom-teacher, giving growing-up guidance to my two children. I was a Hatha yoga teacher, offering meditative relaxation, gentle stretching, and mind-body connection classes. I was a poet-teacher reflecting on life and inviting others to join me in this same endeavour. I was a story-teacher, sharing bits and pieces of my life with others as a way to connect and build bonds of commonality and community. I was also an instructional leader as a school administrator who modeled calm, equanimity, clarity, focus, and discernment with a determined curiosity to learn, to grow, and to become the best that I could be. What follows is the Scholarly Personal Narrative of my seasons of mindful journeying to a deeper awareness of my self and my educational leadership.

### **Beginnings**

For me, fall was a time of fresh beginnings and new possibilities. I was born in the fall just after the autumnal equinox. This time of year always held a special significance for me, not only because of my birth date, but because it heralded the start of a new academic year and I always



loved being in school. I looked forward to learning new things and to helping others learn. That was why I became a teacher and eventually a school administrator.

### **Teacher**

When I looked back on my career as a teacher, I clearly saw the gradual transition from novice to veteran. As a beginning teacher, I remembered spending long days and nights trying to learn my subject matter. I wanted to appear to be knowledgeable even though most times I was barely keeping ahead of the students. My primary goals were mastering the subject matter and learning how to do effective assessment. I came later to this career than most in the 1980's. I was married and already had two small children and found it a struggle to balance work and home. It felt like there were never enough hours in the day to accomplish what needed to be done: learning new material, preparing for classes, marking assignments and tests, along with all the other expectations placed upon new teachers.

I spent my lunch hours when I was not on supervision, working in my classroom. I remember in that first year, after a couple of months of this isolation, the Vice Principal came to visit me and suggested that I should spend more time in the staff room, so I could socialize with my colleagues. When he left, I wondered how I was going to squeeze in that additional social interaction and how much more time that would add to my evening work. At the end of that first year, I let out a huge sigh of relief and thought perhaps I would now have some breathing room. I would not feel so overwhelmed, so frenzied, as though I was barely keeping my head above water. The second year was somewhat better because I had a firmer grasp of my subject matter and a more solid sense of pacing. I gained a better understanding of my students and became more acquainted with my fellow teachers, administrators, and parents.

Each successive year of teaching brought more knowledge, aptitude, and confidence. In my

fifth year, I recall a conversation with a veteran teacher of twenty years. We were discussing how long it took to become a masterful teacher and the attributes that entailed. His view was that it required ten years for most teachers to reach that level of excellence. At that point, I did not know enough to disagree, but if it were true, I still had a long way to go. We concurred that a masterful teacher had the following abilities that I aspired to:

- be present in the moment, read the situation, know the students, and be able to pick up on the nuances of the interactions;
- see each learner as a unique individual with talents and abilities that are waiting to be explored, encouraged, and celebrated;
- be sensitive to each student's needs and know when there is a lack of understanding;
- be adaptive, ingenious, and intellectually flexible;
- engage students in meaningful, purposeful, and relevant activities that are worthwhile to them;
- and, be able to explain key concepts with clarity, distilling complex information down to its comprehensible essence.

Even though I still had much to learn, there were a few insights I acquired. After five years of teaching, I captured these lessons in an epistolary letter that I wrote to my younger self.

It read:

*Letter From An Experienced Teacher To Her Novice Teacher Self*

*If I could have sat down beside you at the start, and had a heartfelt conversation to help you through those beginning years, this is what I would have said.*

*Please do not take yourself too seriously. Laugh at your mistakes; laugh with your students. It will lighten your burdens and put you in touch with what really matters. Yes, there is a lot to*

*learn and to do; and certainly, you have weighty expectations placed upon you. Talk to other teachers; find a mentor. Let your colleagues show you how to pare down the mountain of work to something more manageable. Learn from their expertise. You do not have to do this all by yourself. You do not have to create every lesson and assignment. Borrow what others have already improved upon.*

*It is important to learn your curriculum, but it is even more important to learn as much as you can about your students. And, it is crucial for them to get to know the person you are – what you stand for, what you believe in, what brings you joy, what causes you sadness.*

*It is good that you are dedicated and diligent. Your students deserve your best self. Remember though that your best self comes not only through work ethic and professional development, but also through making time for enjoyment. Set aside time each week for fun.*

*Finally, take stock periodically of how far you have come. When you realize how much you have accomplished and warmly given, including the gifts of kindness and acts of service, embrace yourself with a big hug and celebrate what you have done and who you have become.*

### **L.E.A.D.S. (Leading Education and Developing Schools) Program**

Just before the beginning of my sixth year of teaching, I received a phone call from my superintendent inviting me to join an inaugural leadership development cohort that was being formed within the school division. Its purpose was to blend theory and practice in examining the issue of leadership education with an emphasis on the role of leaders in fostering educational change. It was an honour to be asked to join the cohort because it was an acknowledgement that the work I had been doing in my school was noted and valued. However, I was a little surprised that I was being considered as a candidate for leadership because I did not see myself in this role at that time. I gratefully accepted the invitation, yet I was curious about what this new program

would be like. I discovered that the superintendent was going to lead the classes. At the first meeting of the cohort, I saw that I was included in a small group of seventeen teachers from other schools in the division who were either working on their Master degrees, hoping to receive credit for their participation, or were actively seeking administration positions. I was in neither category, so the appeal for me in taking this program was simply to learn and be exposed to current educational theories as well as strategies.

The cohort met once a month for two years and participated in educational leadership courses which meant doing readings, discussing leadership theories, and completing written assignments. The readings in the courses exposed me to both leadership and management theories from well-known authors that included: W. Edwards Deming, Peter Senge, Michael Fullan, Lee Boleman, and Terrence Deal. What stood out for me about the work of those particular writers was:

- Deming (1994) proposed leadership as a business management model with systems-thinking. He encouraged communication and physical arrangements for informal dialogue between people in the various components of the company, regardless of their level of position and advocated for social gatherings in outside locations. He was also a proponent of continual learning and advancement. He argued for long term planning (consideration of the future in five years, even ten years), acquiring knowledge for change, and encouraging cooperative innovation. Of note was his use of the catch phrase, “win-win”.
- Senge (1990) called for the creation of a community of learners, a group of diverse people coming together to work in a sustained effort to embody the core disciplines (personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning) in daily management

practice. His focus was on how people within organizations think and interact. He argued for “participative openness” (the “freedom to speak one’s mind”) and “reflective openness” (the “willingness to challenge our own thinking, to recognize that any certainty we ever have is, at best, a hypothesis about the world”) that involved “not just examining our own ideas, but mutually examining others’ thinking” (p. 274). He advocated for creating time within the busy workday for quiet contemplation, reflection, and dialogue. He maintained that, “being a leader is a calling, just as being a teacher is a calling” (p. 313).

- Fullan (2001) suggested that the kind of leadership that was required in times of rapid change and complexity were leaders who could deal with uncertainty and inexactitude. His argument was that to be successful, those leaders needed to develop the capabilities of: moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation along with sharing and coherence making. He supported his contention by drawing from experiences in both business and educational organizations. He maintained that leadership and management often overlap - with one difference being that leadership was needed for issues that did not have easy remedies. He wrote about resistance and reculturing (changing the ways that things were done) and how leaders could garner commitment.
- Bolman and Deal (2001) addressed the growing lack of humanity in organizations and the need to find the heart of leadership by rediscovering one’s soul through reflection and self-exploration. They presented these concepts (authorship, love, power, and significance) as “gifts” with which to develop leadership capabilities and capacities within the organization. They emphasized the power of stories and their crucial role in

leadership development.

I was not comfortable with the idea of adapting a business model for education. Deming's "win-win" phrase struck a discordant note with me because it resounded of a model where there were always two divided sides, perhaps even adversarial, who were in a contest of wills and demands, neither wanting to freely acquiesce or compromise unless forced to do so. This winning, competitive-edge mentality (even though I understood his intention of both parties benefiting) did not seem applicable to education's goal of collaborative learning. Also, I did not see students as clients or customers, but rather as children entrusted to the care of their teachers who are the *loco parentis*.

However, I agreed with Deming's call for effective communication and continual learning. I concurred with Senge's argument for the necessity of cooperation and collaboration within a community of learners as long as it also honored individual time for contemplation and reflection. I was particularly interested in what Fullan had to say about resistance in organizations and his suggestions for dealing with resisters. His proposal of the importance of relationship building resonated with me. I was especially drawn to Bolman's and Deal's narrative of soul leadership in the workplace. I wrote a review of their book as an assignment and found very little I could criticize. I had the sense that this book's ideas were being firmly established in my head, heart, and spirit; hence, I felt that I would revisit its wisdom again one day.

As a culminating activity for this L.E.A.D.S. program I wrote a paper entitled, "Effective Leadership For Successful Organizational Change" that was well received by the superintendent who assessed it. I included brief passages from that paper in the following letter.

It read: *Letter For Consideration When I Become an Administrator*

*First a poem:*

*Change, inevitable and constant.*

*A sea of rolling waves – innovation*

*washing over rocky shores of resistance.*

*With a moral compass, the seasoned helmsman*

*in the weather-proof slicker guides the vessel past the murky bottomed shoals,*

*around submerged dangers, through the narrow channel to reach the open water.*

*The courageous and honest captain, not asking from others*

*what he wouldn't do himself. The crew of eager would-be sailors and salty mariners*

*brought together through bonds of trust, respect, and goodwill.*

*Cautious adventurers challenged by the external and internal forces.*

*With one eye on the near water and the other on the distant horizon,*

*the course is strategically charted.*

*Yet everyone recognizes there must be allowance for maneuverability, following instincts,*

*reading the flow, adapting to the elements; equanimity and fortitude are necessary to face the*

*buffeting winds. With meaningful purpose and clarity, mapping out the passage, so all hands on*

*deck know their duties, everyone is accountable, depending on everyone else. “Steady as she*

*goes boys, steady as she goes!” - D. Bearance, 2003*

Here are additional thoughts and advice shared in another epistolary letter.

It read:

*It is a blend of “reading” and understanding the situation, its context and personalities and an*

*enthusiasm for innovation that opens the possibility of moving in a new direction. Further, to*

*create willingness for change, there must be mutual trust and respect. Other elements necessary*

*to build an organization's capacity to change are: collaboration, articulation of rationale, clarity, and a compelling, meaningful purpose. Energy and enthusiasm are contagious. Success comes from the melding of ethics and excellence, passion and synergism.*

*If you choose to pursue a path of leadership:*

*Care deeply about your work and your people; strive to make a difference.*

*Learn from your experiences – both your successes and your failures.*

*Listen with your head and your heart. Speak with compassion.*

*Be confident, but also remain humble. Be willing to listen to criticism and act on new information.*

*Draw upon your strength and courage to make decisions in the face of incomplete information and conflicting pressures.*

*Develop a “thick-skinned” empathy. Be tough enough to take the criticisms and sometimes, personal vilification, yet still keep your humanity in order to feel others' pain and relate to their needs.*

*Finally, in the words of Max DePree (1989), “the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor”(p. 11).*

### **School Administrator**

After completing the L.E.A.D.S. program, I decided to pursue a leadership path. An administration position became available in the small rural school (grades 7 to 12) that I was currently teaching in so I applied. I was given an interview, was hired, and my career as an Assistant Principal began. I had been an English and Social Studies teacher at that school for several years prior to accepting the position. I knew the students, the staff, the parents, and the



community. In some ways, that made the transition to administration easier and in some ways, more difficult. It was easier in the sense that I was already known and respected so I did not have to prove myself as an educational instructor. It was more difficult because I had to establish myself as an educational leader who was accepted as someone with the authority to make decisions and implement change. When you were already a staff member and your position was elevated, I found that the dynamics of your relationship with your colleagues changed. The peers who were your friends, were happy for you and delighted that they had an “ally” in administration. Any colleague, who had a desire to be in administration, questioned why you were chosen and not he or she. Other staff members who only perceived you as a teacher were concerned about your abilities as an administrator. Then there were colleagues who adopted the stance that you were now “admin”, and not one of “them”.

### **Preparation**

Before the school year got underway, I spent a lot of time thinking about the new position that I was undertaking and what that would entail, especially with the possible shift in relational dynamics. I knew that I had much to learn about being a school administrator. It was time to apply the leadership theory that I had learned in L.E.A.D.S. I also felt that I needed to trust my intuition and instincts because they had always held me in good stead up to this point in my life and professional career. I was enthusiastic about being an administrator, but also nervous at the prospect. I tried to anticipate what I would encounter with regard to the attitudes of staff, student, parents, and the larger community. I understood that there would be a different set of expectations placed on me and I wanted to be prepared. I felt that I had to prove myself all over again, prove that I was worthy of this new position.

I knew that the first staff meeting of the year, before school officially began, would be a

testing ground. I would be watched closely, to see if my new status was going to “change” me, set me apart from my colleagues. Would I be the same person who they had known for years or would my new role alter my demeanor? I felt the pressure building.

Staff meetings were held in the library, with tables and chairs arranged in an oval. The principal regularly sat at the top of the oval, flanked on either side by his admin team. Staff members, since they were generally creatures of habit, had a tendency to sit in the same places for every meeting. I chose over the years to sit in a seat at the opposite end of the oval, surrounded by my fellow high school colleagues. Junior high teachers sat along the sides of the oval. Although not acknowledged, nor articulated, there was a definite hierarchy in a combined junior – senior high school staff.

So there I was taking up a new place at the table. I was no longer among my high school colleagues; instead, I sat across from my peers. Besides a perceptual shift in placement there was also a feeling of distance and awkwardness at being on the other side. The staff meeting ran smoothly with the coverage of procedural and policy items to be dealt with. Staff members ran through the list of procedures in readiness for opening day. Teachers were asked to volunteer for extracurricular assignments such as coaching. A supervision schedule was passed around for sign-ups. It was a fairly standard and routine August agenda. There were no new staff members, so everyone around the table was accustomed to the proceedings.

After the staff meeting I went to my new office. My position was now scheduled as a half time high school administrator and as a half time high school teacher. The principal, who also taught some classes, was taking care of the junior high administration. I wanted to have an “open door” policy and be accessible as well as approachable so that staff members, students, and parents would feel that they could come and talk to me whenever they needed to. I was

intent upon building on the good will I had already established as a teacher.

On a prominent wall in my office, I had placed one of my favorite poems – Desiderata, a simple, yet positive credo for life that I endeavoured to live by.

It read:

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.*

*As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.*

*Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant, they too have their story.*

*Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.*

*If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.*

*Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.*

*Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.*

*Exercise caution in your business affairs for the world is full of trickery.*

*But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals, and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

*Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.*

*Take kindly to the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.*

*Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.*

*Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.*

*You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

*Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors  
and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul.*

*With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.*

*Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.*

*- Max Ehrmann c. 1920.*

I read the poem over again and smiled as I sat in my new office. From my perspective, the staff meeting had gone well and there were no indications thus far of any hurdles of personality dynamics to overcome. However, I was not naïve about the possibility of issues in the future; but for now, I breathed deeply and prepared for the beginning of a new school year with all of its promise. I knew there would be challenges, as there are with any new undertaking, but I considered myself to be an optimistic pragmatist and I felt in that moment that I could face whatever might come my way.

### **Undertaking**

Being a teacher helped prepare me for the instructional leadership that was part of the role of an administrator, but it did not provide the background required for some of the other necessary responsibilities. Those tasks required “on the ground”, trial-and-error training. Each day offered new experiences and the learning curve was steep. I came to appreciate the importance of political tact and diplomacy. Patience and fortitude were essential. The energy required of an administrator was different from that of a teacher; by this I mean that there was a higher level of energy required to deal with the constant requests, concerns, and issues. Everyone who arrived at my office door felt that his or her problem was the most pressing and required an immediate

answer or solution. I became a problem-solver and mediator. I eventually learned that if I allowed the staff to consume my time in that way, by taking on their issues and being their “fixer”, that they would gladly abdicate their responsibilities rather than find their own solutions. However, abdication did not help them in the end, and it just created more work and stress for me. I also discovered that sometimes there were certain problems that were best handled after some time had been given to pause and “breathe”. Heat of the moment reactions were not always as wise as those that had been considered after a period of time had elapsed. Eventually, I gave myself permission to use the “sleep on it and then respond” rule in several instances during my administrative tenure. After awhile, I learned to discern which matters required immediate attention with decisive action and which could be set aside for later consideration.

In my early years as a high school Assistant Principal, I was singularly focused on administrative duties and professional development with little consideration for my own wellbeing. In those days, because I was a high school administrator, I felt that the primary purpose of my leadership role was to improve student academic achievement. I was accountable for the academic results from the Diploma examinations that were written in Alberta in grade twelve. Each September the previous year’s examination results were reviewed by the principal and myself, after which I held debriefing meetings with the high school teachers to see what needed to be done to improve their students’ test scores. Another area of consideration was the number of students who did not graduate. Fortunately, in our small school, those students were very few; however, any student who did not complete high school was a significant concern for educators.

### **Action Research**

Along with my administrative and teaching duties, I was given the opportunity to become

the chair of an Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) three-year conjoint action research study between the University of Lethbridge and our school that focused on finding ways to engage at-risk high school students who were in danger of not graduating. That study was called the AISI Action Research Project. Project team members included our Admin team (the principal and myself), high school teachers, one junior high teacher, a practicum student who was assigned to me through the University of Lethbridge and two of its professors who were advisors, along with one of our Central Office administrators.

This project evolved from a conversation between the principal, the University advisors, the Central Office administrator, and me in the spring of 2004. The aim was to address concerns about at-risk students in our school. The team was established and meetings were held to assess the reality of the situation and come up with strategies to achieve our administrators' and teachers' shared goal to improve the learning of underachieving students through the use of best practice and to help and support each teacher in that process. We selected a target group of five grade ten students using a student profile checklist that we developed as a team. The checklist included the following indicators: student attendance, grades, time spent on task, assignment completion rates, attitude and behaviour. We chose to focus on grade ten students so that we could track them longitudinally through to graduation, keeping in mind that the strategies used to improve their learning would benefit the other students in our school. We began by reading an executive summary of Mendler's (2000) book entitled, *Motivating Students Who Don't Care: Successful Techniques for Educators*. We decided to use the *two-minute intervention* strategy outlined in that summary because it was simple and manageable. The utilization of that intervention meant that each of the five teachers on the team, including me, was assigned one of the five students. For two minutes each day, outside of classroom time, the teacher initiated a

conversation that was congenial and personal. We also looked at Buehl's (2001) book, *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Our initial expectation was that we would develop strategies and policies that would provide the necessary interventions and would improve our learning community through research and collaborative discourse.

In the initial discussion that determined our current reality, it was acknowledged by the team members that, although our mission of creating a safe and caring educational environment was worthwhile, it seemed to be overshadowing the academic learning in our school. That was a growing concern because of the accountability issues surrounding course completion, Diploma exam results, and graduation rates. Teachers, who were responsible for Diploma exam courses, experienced a significant amount of pressure to improve the percentage of students attaining acceptable standards and standards of excellence. Team members felt the need to refocus efforts on student learning and academic achievement. The purpose of the project was two-fold: (a) teachers were tired of working in isolation so there was a strong desire to have a collaborative learning community; and (b) by having teachers more effectively connect with our target group of students, teachers would help to improve the students' attendance, on-task behaviour, along with assignment completion, and ultimately their learning.

Team members knew that taking on a project of that scope would not be easy and the three-year commitment would be difficult to sustain; however, there was hope that it would provide the framework and support to improve student learning and enhance teacher practice. The team was willing to work together to achieve those common goals despite there being strong personalities in the group, who vigorously guarded their classroom autonomy and steadfastly held their conflicting pedagogical philosophies.

One of the significant findings from that study was the importance of building personal

connections with students outside of the classroom as well as inside. Letting those students know that they were cared about as individuals was foundational in keeping them motivated in coming to school and engaging in the learning process. Another key outcome of the study was that the teachers who participated were encouraged to develop a daily self-reflection of their professional practice. A snippet from one of my reflections seems prescient given the topic of this dissertation: “I realize that being a reflectitioner (a reflective practitioner) is a practice of mindfulness, paying attention to the present moment, to be ‘here, now’. It is developing a sense of ‘feel’ and coming to terms with the holistic, sensical humanness of what we do” (Bearance, 2006).

In the final reflections written at the end of the study, all of the team members deemed the work of the project worthwhile, not only for themselves as professionals, but also for the academic success of their students. The project culminated in a paper that was co-written by myself and my practicum student. We co-presented at AERA (American Educational Research Association) in San Francisco in 2006. Two years after that study ended, Diploma exam results at our school improved substantially placing it at an unprecedented ranking of 39<sup>th</sup> (from a previous five year ranking of 107<sup>th</sup>) out of a field of 285 ranking high schools in the province of Alberta according to the Frazier Institute Report (2008). That was a significant accomplishment for a small rural school. After that achievement, I felt that it was time for me to expand my administrative horizon and look for new challenges. As one administrative chapter was closing and another one about to begin, I decided to capture my reflections on my first assignment as an administrator.

It read:

*Letter to My Administrative Self*



*As I look back on the last four years of administrative work, I can see how my perspective and demeanor as an administrator have evolved. I remember that when I was hired, I was enthusiastic about the opportunity to put into practice the leadership theories I had studied during my courses in the LEADS program. I was eager for this new role to begin, but I was uncertain as to how I would be perceived by staff and students. I thought that because I was now an Assistant Principal in the same school in which I had been a teacher that I had to somehow project more of an authoritative figure in order to gain credibility with both the staff and the students. After all, I was a high school administrator with tremendous responsibility in a high stakes academic setting. My focus was on assisting teachers and students to improve academic achievement. Our school, up to this point, had worked diligently at creating a safe and caring learning environment, but our Diploma exam results were lacking. Accountability pressure was building and it was time to refocus our efforts on academic improvement. I was looking forward to the AISI work we were to embark upon and the prospect of creating a collaborative learning community.*

*That first administrative year was a profound transition period for me. I worked hard and learned as much as I could about the complexities of leadership. Leadership theory was useful to a point but everyday administrative encounters from the on-the-job training were where the real learning happened and was crystallized. I was basically on my own to figure out how things should be handled and managed. It was definitely a trial-and-error situation. I learned much from the mistakes I made.*

*I came to understand that I could not solve every problem, no matter how much I wanted to. I quickly realized the importance of effective communication – deeply listening and hearing what was being said and conveyed. I became better at reading people and situations.*

*Over the next three years, I believe that I grew into the role of administrator. I realized that I could be my authentic self. Staff and students appreciated my integrity, dedication, and follow-through. They knew that they could count on me and that I cared about them. I came to see that both performance and personal connection were needed for optimal learning to take place.*

*So what advice would I give to myself as I go forward into my next administrative position? Be your true self. Build genuine, caring relationships. Make time to reflect on your practice. Be guided by what is most important, what truly matters. Enjoy the work that you do.*

### **New Position as an Administrator**

Building authentic relationships and being reflective about my professional practice were two key skills that I took with me to my next administrative position as an elementary Vice Principal in a different school division. Even though I was still concerned with instruction and academic achievement, my primary goal was to develop genuine relationships with the staff, students, parents, and community. As a new administrator in that division, I had to undergo a one-year evaluation process that meant I needed to prove myself, not only to my school community, but to the administration of the division as well. I also began my Masters degree program during that time. It was an intensive year, with many commitments and responsibilities. I was particularly invested in nurturing and supporting others while often neglecting to look after myself.

### **Elementary School**

Being in a small rural elementary school (K-6) was a refreshing change from the high stakes pressure of a high school setting. I enjoyed the strong nurturing culture that was evident in the new school. Getting and giving hugs was a wonderful benefit of spending time with young children. For the first while, I was an observer, taking in the school traditions and paying

attention to the staff dynamics.

The last time that I had taught an elementary class was many years earlier. I knew that it would require some time to become familiar with a different instructional leadership role. Even though there were challenges, the learning was enjoyable. The staff, students, parents, and community were welcoming and it was not long before I felt “at home.”

A new role, which was part of my administrative duties, was being a learning support teacher. In that capacity, I soon realized the necessity for taking a closer look at the reading program in the school. Each teacher was responsible for her or his class’s reading instruction, but there was more isolation in that task than collaboration. It was apparent that teachers were not receiving the full support that they required in that endeavour. What became evident was that there was a need for a shift from the solitary, autonomous practice of teachers often working in isolation, to a strategic collaboration where those educators were productive, interdependent members of a learning team. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were becoming the norm in the education field at that juncture.

After reviewing the current reading assessment scores for each grade as well as the grade three and grade six Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) results, it became clear that a more strategic collaborative learning approach would be beneficial. I spoke with my principal and we brainstormed at length about what that would look like in our school. He was enthusiastic about having more collaboration and targeted instruction; hence, over the course of that year, in consultation with the staff, we constructed an implementation plan. At that time I had begun a Master degree program and I had given considerable thought to aligning my thesis with the work that I was engaged in at our school. I decided that my thesis would examine the development of an effective learning response team.

## **Master of Arts in Leadership and Administration**

The reading and research that I did in the Gonzaga University's Master's program contributed significantly to the implementation work that was accomplished at school. I chose Gonzaga because I was drawn to its humanistic leadership philosophy. It seemed to be a good fit for me personally and for the style of leadership I was consciously developing. I remember one of the early assignments was to write a letter outlining my personal credo. I share that letter which offered a collection of my foundational beliefs.

It read:

### *A Letter to Articulate My Beliefs*

*I believe in living my life with dignity, integrity, equanimity, and grace. I value being grounded, centered, and "living" my beliefs. I think that common sense is vital.*

*I believe in caring about others and doing whatever I can to make their lives better. I will help people be the best that they can be. I will encourage others to work together to solve problems and resolve conflict. I will not ask or expect others to do what I would not do.*

*I believe in accepting people for who they are. I will be open to others' ideas and perspectives.*

*I will make a conscious effort to really hear what the other person is saying. I will not judge someone's motives – how can I possibly know what her or his life's circumstances or journey is, or has been.*

*I believe in respect, fairness, and consistency. I believe in the decency and goodness of others.*

*I honour their dignity.*

*I am committed to living in the moment. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow is unknown - there is only the present that needs to be treasured. I wake up each morning, grateful for my blessings and look forward to the unfolding of the day. I recognize that attitude is a conscious choice.*

*I believe in enjoying my family and friends and finding a balance between work and personal time.*

*I believe that my children need to be their authentic selves, finding their unique paths through life. They are a gift to be cherished, not to be held on to.*

*I will live my life with hope, resiliency, and courage. My motto is, “this too, shall pass”.*

*I am passionate about what I do. I will continue to learn and grow, to be curious and creative, to take risks, imagine possibilities, accept challenges, as well as be open to new people and experiences.*

*I admit when I am wrong or have made a mistake and say that I am sorry. I am responsible and accountable for my actions.*

*I believe that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary actions and endeavours. I believe that people deserve a second chance.*

*I will not take myself too seriously. I will take the initiative, make things happen, and be BOLD.*

*I believe in genuine recognition and celebration of the effort, good work, success, and contribution of others. And finally, I believe in saying, “Thank you”. – D. Bearance, 2009*

I realized after I finished writing the letter that it was worthwhile and meaningful to articulate exactly what I believed in and what I stood for. It was important for me personally, as well as professionally, to take the time to examine my core values and write them down for review.

Those statements were testaments to my head, heart, and soul convictions.

## **Lessons Learned**

That first year, in my Masters program and in my new administrative position, taught me a tremendous amount about myself and solidified for me the professional leadership path I wanted to take. I came to have a clearer understanding of what I valued as some of the requisites for

effective educational leadership including the time for reflection along with the opportunity to articulate those reflections and share them with others. By sharing my values with my colleagues, I was crystallizing for myself what mattered the most to me. The insights from those reflections at that time were:

- As an educational leader, my first priority is to reach and connect with staff and students in a meaningful and fluid manner. I want to provide a holistic approach to learning with a reflective leadership that builds on individual's talents and strengths by providing a context of possibility.
- I want to be part of an educational process that encourages transformational growth, intellectual mastery, innovative creativity, social consciousness, and spiritual depth with the support of humanistic, collaborative leadership.
- The compelling purpose of education should be to promote the kind of meaningful and relevant learning that will result in staff and students being generative and adaptive while achieving personal development, compassion, growth, and excellence in order to willingly and confidently meet the challenges of life and positively contribute to the world in which they live.
- And finally, learning is an organic experience of challenges, possibilities, and opportunities. It is our responsibility as educational leaders to provide an authentic experience not only for our staff and students but for our selves as well.

I agreed with Eisner that to be a truly effective leader required “skill and grace.... sensitivity, intelligence, and creativity” to reach the higher level of the craft (2002, pp. 154-156). In my view, an exemplary leader was someone who had a rich texture of life to draw from and who possessed the wisdom to know what really mattered. This was someone who experienced the

magnificence and malady of living while optimistically and vibrantly continued to explore potentialities, take chances, and imagine possibilities. I believed that it was a leader's capacity to connect with the heart of learning and find its essence that encouraged staff and students to learn and grow into who they were meant to be.

## **Chapter 5: Winter Endurance**

*Into the open, across the divide - an eminent domain of non-belonging.*

- D. Bearance, 2010

I ended the last chapter by writing about “growing” into who a person is meant to be. For the most part, growth comes from nurturance and effort. Sometimes, however, growth happens because of a traumatic experience. There might be moments of crisis in life that propel an individual in a new direction. Moments that force her onto a path she never expected to take and that cause her to re-evaluate where her life is going.

I began my second year at my new school with great anticipation. The staff was committed to the implementation of the learning response team and everyone worked hard to prepare for the undertaking. Our diagnostic reading intervention program began in September and by November, teachers reported assessment results that showed marked improvement for students who were having difficulties. We were well on our way and optimistic enthusiasm prevailed.

The last year and half had been a tremendous amount of hard work but very gratifying. I looked forward to the coming months and to finishing my Master degree. Then, in November, my health took a turn, and I ended up having two successive bouts of pneumonia. As educators are want to do, I soldiered on, but I had a nagging sense that there might be more to my unhealthy state than just pneumonia. I kept thinking that I would have time over the Christmas holidays to rest and get healthy again.

### **The News**

During the Christmas break I realized that my intuition was correct and further medical attention was required. I want to digress for a moment and say that I am a private person; I do not usually share my traumatic experiences with others. That is, until now. Critics of personal



narrative attempt to discredit this methodology by arguing that it is self-serving and nothing more than a narcissistic medium. That is not my intention or purpose. I am telling my personal narrative so that others who read this and who may have similar experiences will not feel alone. I hope that my story may be of some benefit to others and the impetus for them to begin their own self-inquiries and discoveries, both personally as well as professionally.

I am writing this chapter on the fifth anniversary of my breast cancer surgery. Five years is a milestone in cancer survival. I am so very grateful that I have reached this point. In one way, it seems like yesterday that I was being admitted to the hospital, and in another, it seems like a lifetime ago.

In January of 2010, I was diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma, approximately one centimeter in size, at a Grade II stage. I am considered high risk for breast cancer because of my family's medical history. Ten years earlier, my younger sister was diagnosed with this disease. I had a cousin who died from it in her early forties. It was found on both the maternal and paternal sides of my family tree. Because of that, I was vigilant in my breast self-exams and had screening mammograms on a regular basis. I was also very "tuned" into my body through years of Hatha yoga practice. During a self-exam at Christmas time, I discovered something that I thought was unusual. I determined to contact the mammogram clinic in January to make an appointment as well as call my family doctor.

On January 15, I had a mammogram and was told to wait for the radiologist's assessment. Waiting was very difficult, especially because I sensed that something was not right. The time seemed to be suspended, interminable. Finally, the technician returned and said that I needed to have an ultrasound. My heart sank and my pulse quickened. I felt a sense of gloom descend upon me. I tried to calm myself by silently saying, "do not worry until you know for sure that

there is something to worry about.” I was led into the ultrasound room and asked to lie down on the table. The technician began the ultrasound then went to get the radiologist.

He came in, looked at the ultrasound monitor, turned to me and stated matter-of-factly that I had a malignancy. It took my brain a bit to comprehend what my ears had just heard. I asked him if he was sure. He said he had seen at least 500 of these same tumors and they were all malignant. It is very difficult to put into words what I felt at that moment. I think I was in shock and not ready to acknowledge the certainty. Here I was in a cold, sterile room, my chest exposed, being told in a very business-like manner by a doctor, who was a stranger, that I had breast cancer. While I was trying to process this, the radiologist said that he would send the report to my doctor that day so that a biopsy could be scheduled. Then he left the room. The technician, who was a young woman, helped me clean off the ultrasound gel from my chest and get up from the table. She accompanied me back to the change cubicle. I went through the motions of getting out of the medical gown and putting on my clothes. Then I left the building and got in my SUV. I just sat there, stunned. After awhile, tears began streaming down my cheeks. My body started to tremble. I was not sure what to do next. I reached for my cell phone and called my adult daughter. I did my best to tell her the news. She was in shock as well and did not know what to say. I finished the call and sat there for a while longer. After some time, the crying stopped, and a sense of calm came over me. I have heard that when people are faced with a cancer diagnosis, they often ask, “why me”. That was not how I responded; instead, my inner voice said, “alright this is what you have been given, so you need to deal with it in the best way you can.” The next thought that occurred to me was perhaps this was happening so that I could in some way help other women who would have to endure this. I wrote this poem following my diagnosis experience.

It read:

*You Have ...*

*In the deepest part of my being, I know.*

*But I don't want to be told because then it is real.*

*I don't want to hear the cold, hard facts.*

*I don't want it said out loud, confirmed.*

*This sentence.*

*This life limiting, finite term,*

*what is sensed, becomes certain.*

*A stranger, a doctor with a professional shield of detachment,  
an invisible but palpable barrier that puts dispassion and distance*

*between him and me.*

*No connection, no empathy, no compassion;*

*just objectivity and what needs to be perfunctorily stated.*

*This declaration.*

*He is quick to make his safe exit.*

*And I am left to collect myself, to leave the building,*

*to sit alone in my empty, silent vehicle*

*dazed and numb.*

*Left on my own to process, to tremble, to weep,*

*to grieve the imminent loss; and to accept.*

*This diagnosis.*

*- D. Bearance, 2010*

## Process

The next day I was back at work in my elementary school. I was not ready to share my news with anyone until I had my biopsy results. When I received the cancer confirmation, I told my principal and office administrator. They were stunned but extremely supportive. I decided that I would not tell the staff until just before I left for my surgery.

Between the day of my biopsy results on January 26 and my surgery on February 12, I researched extensively. I scoured every piece of medical information on breast cancer and its treatments, both traditional and alternative that I could find. I kept a journal of pertinent information and I formulated questions I would ask the nurse navigator I was assigned by the cancer centre where I was a patient. I determined from the outset, that I would be my own “advocate” within the traditional medical system. My goal was to learn as much as I could about the cancer protocols and be proactive in finding the most qualified surgeon, radiologist, and oncologist. I read volumes of material, asked comprehensive questions, and took detailed notes.

The day before my surgery, I was scheduled to go to the hospital for sentinel-lymph-node mapping (SLN). About a week prior to this, I was told what the procedure and its preparation entailed. I was prescribed a topical lidocaine that I was to apply to my breast at least half an hour before the mapping was to occur. That meant that before going into the waiting room, I was to slather on the gel, then wrap my breast in a plastic covering such as saran wrap, sit and wait to be called. This method did not seem efficacious to me so I researched what was written concerning the preparation and discovered a research paper in a well respected medical journal, the Lancet Oncology, that reported a study conducted at Walter Reed hospital in August 2009 (Stojadinovic, et al). The findings showed that the addition of 1% lidocaine to the technetium-99m sulfur colloid improved patient comfort without compromising SLN. I called the nuclear

medicine department and told them about the research and asked if they would consider this new strategy. They eventually got back to me and said that there would be no access to lidocaine for the SLN procedure and that I must go ahead and follow the prescribed protocol. The nuclear medicine department was located in the hospital so I found it difficult to believe that given advance notice, there would be no access to a lidocaine solution.

I resigned myself to this indignity, and arrived at the hospital the day of the SLN. I sat in my vehicle in a dark parkade, put on rubber gloves, covered my breast with gel, wrapped it in plastic as best as I could, then sat in the anteroom waiting to be admitted for my procedure. Finally I was called in, put on a surgical table, and left to wait for the radiologist to arrive. When he entered the room, he did not say a word. He walked over to me, inserted a syringe into my breast, injected the dye, withdrew the needle, and exited the room. The nurse, who was assisting, came over and patted my arm, saying that she was sorry, but the doctor was not happy with me because I suggested an alternative strategy. I asked if he had reviewed the Walter Reed study and she said no, but she would show it to him. After the dye was injected, a time lapse was required before the actual mapping could take place, so I was told to come back in an hour. When I returned, I was once again put on the table and waited for the radiologist to arrive. This time he walked in and courteously acknowledged me. After the procedure was over, and he left the room, the nurse told me that he had read the study and was interested in its findings and conclusion. I was told that this new lidocaine protocol was going to be brought to the attention of the head of the department of nuclear medicine. The nurse said it might take a couple of years for it to become a standard of practice, but the process was underway. She thanked me and said that this would make a difference for other women having to undergo SLN. I took consolation in knowing that they would not have to endure what I had.

Knowing that my effort would help others, somewhat assuaged the indignity of the experience. In advocating for my self and others, it appeared that I was up against a medical system that did not look favorably upon patient input, no matter how constructive. To be fair, I am sure that physicians get tired of hearing from patients who have “researched” their symptoms and possible treatments on the Internet and feel that they are knowledgeable. This must be frustrating for the medical profession and often a valid reason for their impatience. Yet I knew that I could not be docile and passive with regard to my medical care. What I was to discover in my cancer journey was that to be considered a “good” patient meant that I had to submit, comply, and be pleasant (what I termed, SCP). As I underwent the surgery and radiation treatments that followed, I found it difficult at times to fulfill the SC (submit and comply) components of the patient requirements. To do so, would have resulted in a diminishment of my being and I was not willing to succumb to that without a truly valid reason.

Three days into my radiation treatments, I developed excruciating and debilitating joint and muscle pain. I was barely able to walk. During a checkup with the radiation oncologist, he said that the radiation was not the cause; instead, he suggested that I had probably picked up a flu bug. This “flu” lasted for over two years. Afterwards I learned from reading breast cancer blogs, that there were many other women, who underwent radiation, who experienced similar symptoms.

Because of the severity of my joint and muscle pain, I was reluctant to take the oral chemotherapy drugs that were the standard protocol for breast cancer treatment. My oncologist, who was a nice man, admitted that the side effects were likely to exacerbate my condition and could possibly cause ovarian cancer and other severely harmful outcomes. When I finally declined these medications, he kindly said that there was no point in me coming to see him

anymore; in essence, I was “dismissed”.

I do not want to give the impression that all of my contact with the medical profession was dismissive and disheartening. I also encountered compassionate and supportive specialists, physicians, nurses, and other clinicians along the way. My family doctor at the time was empathic, often spending much more time with me than was allotted for my appointments. He also called me at home on a couple of occasions to check in with me. My current family doctor is a lovely physician who is warm, caring, and thorough. She deeply listens and is intent on “getting to the bottom of things.”

Empathy and compassion are important to all patients, but especially to those dealing with cancer. It is a destructive invader that ravishes not only your body but your mind and spirit as well; it takes control of your being. The self that you thought you possessed becomes an eminent domain of non-belonging. What is a private being becomes a public entity - a seizure that you have not willingly given consent to. When I became a registered cancer patient with a bright red card, I realized that I was now a member of a foreign, ill society to which I did not want to belong. But I no longer felt that I fit into the accustomed, healthy world either. I was displaced, an outcast. I do not use the word “outcast” lightly. Even though this is the twenty-first century, there is still a stigma associated with cancer (Frank, 1991). Some people fear that cancer is “contagious.” I remember visiting my acupuncturist shortly after my diagnosis and was informed of an earlier incident when one of his clients found out that the previous person had cancer and therefore refused to go into the same room where this other client had been. Other people are not comfortable around cancer patients because it reminds them of their own mortality (Frank, 1991). The medical world repeatedly points out that there is no cure for cancer; hence, there is only a precarious remission to look forward to (Frank, 1991). Since that is what you are

led to believe, you find yourself in a perpetual state of impermanent return to the healthy world. You can come and go but with every periodic checkup, there is trepidation and anxiety over the possibility that the cancer has recurred or metastasized and you will once again become a resident of the illness world. Thus, how you see yourself and how you are viewed and treated by others, has a significant impact on your outlook, recovery, and healing.

### **Impact**

Once I became a cancer patient, I began to look at life differently. Some of the things in my life that were important before, no longer were. I made a vow to live life fully until the last possible moment. Living is a precious gift to be faithfully cherished. I was, and continue to be, so grateful for each day that I have been given. I wanted to spend my time smiling, laughing, and dancing. I was even more determined to treasure the simple pleasures of life, such as enjoying time with my young grandchildren, watching sunsets, going for walks, and listening to uplifting music. I realized it was up to me to take charge of my recovery and healing. I sensed that the way I viewed my circumstances would greatly contribute either in a positive or negative way to my healing and health. What follows is a reminder I wrote to myself at that time.

It read:

#### *The Gift of Today*

*If you believe that each day is a divine gift,*

*Then you need to trust that the good*

*and the bad experiences are also the unfolding*

*of understanding and enrichment.*

*The negative can be viewed as a call for reflection,*

*prompting you to listen more care-fully,*



*act with more compassion and wisdom;  
a lesson you may not have noticed or taken to heart  
if everything was going smoothly.  
The positive is an opportunity to celebrate the offering  
of joy and meaning, to let you know and reaffirm  
that you are connected, you are fulfilling your purpose;  
a beacon that illuminates your faith  
and helps you walk upon your path with grace.*

- D. Bearance, 2010

Therefore, I knew that I needed to see myself, not as a victim of my illness, but rather as a survivor and even someone who thrives. I viewed cancer as an opportunity to become reacquainted with the essence of my being. Because of the severe pain caused by the radiation treatments, I was not able to work and went on a medical leave. I was very appreciative for that healing time and every morning when I awoke I said a prayer of gratitude. Recovery was a slow, arduous process, but I was determined to regain mental, physical, and spiritual vitality.

### **Aftermath**

It became my mission to achieve optimal health. I did weekly physical therapy, massage therapy, and acupuncture treatments. In addition, I enrolled in a cancer yoga class that I found particularly difficult. I had practiced Hatha yoga for twenty years prior to this illness and now I could not even do the simplest postures. It would have been very easy to become disheartened and give up, but I was determined that one day I would regain my flexibility and so I persevered.

I researched alternative cancer protocols and found that there were successful treatment programs being conducted in Germany that consisted of hyperthermia and the usage of natural

supplements. Hyperthermia exposed patients to high temperatures for a period of time in far-infrared chambers (Rao, Deng, & Liu, 2010; van der Zee, 2002; Wust, et al., 2002). German doctors found that cancer cells cannot survive in this kind of heat, so I purchased a far-infrared sauna and spent time in it each day.

I became vigilant about my diet. I learned that cancer feeds on sugar and I tried to eliminate refined white sugar as much as possible. I began taking vitamins and additional supplements along with foods that were antioxidants. I ate more organic vegetables and fruit and tried to avoid processed food, dairy, and gluten. My goal was to reach a more alkaline rather than acidic pH body state. Although I believe that this regimen was beneficial for me, I do not presume to suggest it for others.

Besides being very careful about my diet, I was also determined to reduce as much stress in my life as possible. I decided that I wanted to spend more time with people who had a positive outlook on life, thus I tried to avoid what I termed the “negative nellys,” or the people who seemed to thrive on emotional drama. I also sought experiences that were uplifting to my spirit.

While cancer patients are undergoing treatments or in the aftermath of, it is recommended that they have an appointment with a psychologist who is experienced in dealing with such matters. I was referred to an excellent clinician who, in my first session, told me about a breast cancer group he was forming to do meditation and mindfulness practice. I told him that I was not able to participate in a weekly group session because it was held in Calgary and I live in High River. Since I was driving back and forth between my home and the city a couple of times a week already for appointments, I was unable to do additional travelling. Instead, he recommended that I read a book entitled, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Reading this book was

truly an enlightening experience for me.

### **Turning Point**

There were many passages in Kabat-Zinn's (1991) book that resonated with me. In fact, I credit it as the impetus for a positive turning point in my recovery and in my life. I would like to revisit some of the key ideas that were particularly significant for me.

Kabat-Zinn wrote that:

... the cultivation and practice of mindfulness, can serve as a doorway into a profound way of knowing ourselves better and for mobilizing the inner resources we all have, no matter what our situation and our condition, for learning, for growing, for healing, and for the transformation across the life span, starting from where we find ourselves, no matter where or how that is.... The real question and the real adventure, is how do we *live* our lives while we have the chance? And how do we work with what comes our way in ways that are healing, that nourish us deeply and that make use of the full spectrum of our experiences, the good, the bad, and the ugly, Zorba's full catastrophe?... we humans are miraculous beings, and how creative and imaginative we are when we nurture what is deepest and best in ourselves with kindness, self-compassion, and patience. (pp. xxviii, xxix)

From the helpful guidance of this book, I learned about mindfulness and I began my own practice. I was inspired to acquire a deeper sense of self-awareness and self-acceptance to reach a place of "conscious living" (p.1).

Because of this book, I was more intent upon confronting any of the crises that might occur in my life. As Kabat-Zinn stated, "there is an art to facing difficulties in ways that lead to effective solutions and to inner peace and harmony" (p. 3). Problems help us to "mobilize our inner resources" and "propel us through" by "controlling what is controllable and letting go of

the rest” (p. 3). It was crucial to understand my attitude toward the problem. It was an individual’s attitude about the situation she found herself in that mattered and made a difference. I came to understand that attitude was a choice. I was free to choose how I perceived the challenges that confounded me - this was one of the transformative components of my healing.

### **Wrap Up**

My recovery progressed enough to allow me to finish writing my Master’s thesis and successfully defend it to complete my degree. I dedicated my thesis to “indomitable spirits and ‘unconquerable souls’ (Henley, 1888) that possess the courage to face critical challenges with unwavering hearts and resolute minds” (Bearance, 2010, p. 3). In addition, I was told that the work of the learning response team in my school was going well and having positive results. In fact, other schools in the division were visiting to find out about it, with the hope that they might develop and implement similar teams. I once heard the term, “legacy” described as not just a significant contribution, but also as work that a person has initiated which continues long after she is gone. I believe that everyday, each of us has the opportunity to build a legacy that we can leave behind, our contribution to humankind.

## **Chapter 6: Spring Resilience**

*Waking up this morning, I smile:*

*Twenty-four brand-new hours are before me.*

*I vow to live each moment fully*

*and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.*

- Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011, p. 11

### **Thich Nhat Hanh**

It seems that in life, one thing leads to another, just as a season transitions to the next. As my mindfulness practice evolved, so did my interest in learning more about the training. In Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*, he mentioned Thich Nhat Hanh and I was curious to find out more about this Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk. I discovered that he was a teacher, author, poet, and peace activist who attended Princeton University and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1967. During the Vietnam War, Hanh and his monastic students actively practiced "engaged Buddhism" and set up an organization to improve the quality of life of the Vietnamese people living in the countryside and to "promote peace and reconciliation" (Hanh, 2011, p. 3). I read Hanh's (2011) book, *Peace Is Every Breath: A Practice For Our Busy Lives* and found that it was a very useful, practical guide to meditation.

In his introduction, Hanh wrote:

All of us need to have a spiritual dimension in our lives. We need spiritual practice. If practice is regular and solid, we will be able to transform the fear, anger, and despair in us and overcome the difficulties we all encounter in daily life.... Our spiritual practice can be there at any moment, as we cultivate the energy of mindfulness and concentration. No matter what you're doing, you can choose to do it with your full presence, with

mindfulness and concentration; and your action becomes a spiritual practice. With mindfulness, you breathe in, and there you are, well established in the here and the now. ... Mindfulness is the energy that makes us fully present, fully alive.... Mindfulness is what brings us back in touch with what's happening in the present moment in our body, in our feelings, in our thinking, and also in our environment. (pp. 5, 6)

Many of Hanh's practical mindfulness strategies resonated with me. Hanh wrote about "taking refuge" which means that no matter what we are confronted with, we have a safe place within our selves with which to "weather the storms" of life; essentially, that meant returning to our practice of mindful breathing (p. 35). He urged his readers to "have space" or to make time in their lives for themselves and the people they cared about by letting go of the inconsequential things (pp. 50, 52). He encouraged the practice of "understanding and loving", also known as loving kindness which meant comprehending our own, as well as others', difficulties and suffering (p. 53). Readers were instructed to "contemplate impermanence" fully realizing and acting upon the reality that what was here today may be gone tomorrow, including the people in their lives (p. 83). Finally, Hanh recommended the practice of "deep compassionate listening" along with "loving speech" (pp. 101, 105). I began to practice these strategies because I could see their potential to benefit my life and possibly assist in my educational leadership in the future.

### **Spirituality in Leadership**

The more I reflected on my journey thus far and the challenges I confronted, I came to understand that I was searching for meaning in my life and work. Before cancer, it was easy for me to become so involved in the day-to-day events of work and living that I lost touch with my essence. Somehow my life was lived, I went through the motions, but there was little zest. I

began to think about how I would regain my vitality and figure out where I wanted to go from here. It seemed that what was necessary was a reconnection with my spirit and faith. As Campbell observed, “it is by going into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life” (1995, p. 24).

About this time, a friend of mine, who was in my Master’s program cohort, got in touch and asked me to join her in taking a graduate course at the University of Calgary. This course was called, *Spirituality and Inspired Leadership*, and the instructor was Dr. David C. Jones. I was drawn to the course description and so I decided to enroll. After the first class, I remembered feeling as though I was part of a community of like-minded individuals who were on similar spiritual discovery paths.

### **Self-Realization**

In one of the course texts, *Anselm and the Academy of Self-Realization*, Dr. Jones wrote, “concentrating on the outside permits you to ignore, even repress, your duty to yourself, [if you] don’t look into yourself [you are away from] the only place where genuine peace and fulfillment reside” (2009, p. 142). I felt that my purpose in taking that course was to deeply search inside my being and find the wisdom of my Higher Self. After each class, I wrote reflections in a journal. What follows are some passages from it.

**Reflection one.** I see this journal as an invitation to explore my self and my leadership journey. I believe that character is the essence of leadership. As a leader, it is vital for me to know my self and what I stand for. An authentic leader is a genuine being who is self-aware, someone who is in touch with, and connected to her inner truth. How does one get in touch with this higher knowing? I believe that reflective introspection, raw honesty, and courageous perseverance are necessary for this in-depth soul searching. Each individual has the capability to

search within, but she or he needs to be at peace with what is uncovered, and accept that knowledge in order to realize her or his beautiful and powerful Self.

Hubbard (1922) wrote, “In the silent depths of subconsciousness lie myriads of truths, each awaiting the time when its owner shall call it forth. And to utilize these stored-up thoughts, you must express them to others, and, to express well, your soul has to soar into this subconscious realm where you have cached these net results of experience” (p. 98). This meant that I had the knowledge I required; I just needed to journey inward to access it and discover its wisdom. As a leader, I continued to draw upon my spiritual compass and true sense of Self to find the way forward. Finally, I thought that:

*By liberating our spirits from the worldly constraints  
and focusing inwardly on the power of our self-possession,  
we can reconnect with the wisdom and knowing that resides within.*

*This knowledge that has existed from the beginning,  
not originating from us, but existing in our essential awareness;  
acknowledged and affirmed through our universal experiences.*

- D. Bearance, 2011

**Reflection two.** As a person, who is a leader, I want to look through my introspective lens in search of self-knowledge, to find out what I believe in, what matters the most to me and what I stand for. Integrity, compassion, equanimity, resiliency, and grace are the foundational points of my compass. It is through these character traits, that I hope to live my life in a meaningful way and set an example for others.

Several years ago when I applied for my first administrative position, I was asked to submit a philosophy of leadership statement. I began by expressing how important integrity was to me.



I believed that the key elements of this trait were honesty, goodness, and forthrightness. Integrity also meant doing what you said you were going to do and following through.

Today, I still believe that integrity is crucial; however, I would add more depth to my definition. In *Reawakening The Spirit In Work*, Hawley (1993) proffered that “integrity is having the courage and self-discipline to live by your inner truth” (p. 134). It takes fortitude and determination to live what you know to be true. According to Hawley, courage “isn’t the absence of fear; it’s proceeding in spite of it. It’s being candid when it may be dangerous. It’s going ahead and doing it or saying it even if it’s uncomfortable” (p. 133). There were many times as a leader when it was necessary for me to tell a person something he or she was not open to hearing. It was a difficult thing to do. I always tried to approach the situation with respect and consideration, honouring the dignity of the person, regardless of the issue or problem.

**Reflection three.** Integrity, then, is standing up for what you believe in and following your inner truth. Part of that inner truth is caring about yourself and the people you have interactions with. Compassion means encouraging your heart and fully awakening it to the possibilities and potential of others. Kouzes and Posner, in their book, *Encouraging The Heart: A Leader’s Guide To Rewarding And Recognizing Others*, maintained that, “if people work with leaders who encourage the heart, they feel better about themselves. Their self-esteem goes up. These leaders set people’s spirits free, often inspiring them to become more than they ever thought possible” (1999, p. 11).

In order for a leader to genuinely connect with others, she has to be open. It is a risk to let others get to know you and connect with you in a personal way. Openness is something that I have to work on because I am a private person. But once I started to share more of myself with others, I found them willing to trust and develop a deeper personal connection between us.

According to Walsch (1996):

Relationships are constantly challenging; constantly calling you to create, express and experience higher and higher aspects of yourself, grander and grander visions of yourself, ever magnificent *versions* of yourself. Nowhere can you do this more immediately, impactfully and immaculately than in relationships. In fact without relationships you cannot do it at all.... Relationships are sacred because they provide life's grandest opportunity, indeed its only opportunity to create ... the experience of your highest conception of self. (pp. 121, 124)

Building respectful and trusting relationships has always been important to me and I believe it is the heart of leadership. It is the most crucial and probably the most difficult role a leader undertakes.

I used to look at relationship building from the perspective of creating a climate of caring where people were willing to risk and intellectually engage in meaningful and purposeful learning through cooperation and collaboration. Part of that meaningful engagement came through the sharing of personal experiences. I found that often the most impactful way to engage others was to share stories. Kouzes and Posner (1999) contended that, "storytelling is an essential skill for passing along the lessons that we learn from highly complex, challenging situations.... [the] ultimate hallmark of world-class champion leaders is the ability to weave all the other elements together into vibrant stories that lead their organizations into the future" (pp. 103, 105). As I sat in our spirituality class each day, I had the privilege of witnessing the profound impact stories had; powerful messages spoken from one heart to another, acknowledging, recognizing, and celebrating the Spirit in each of us.

I now view authentic relationship building and heartfelt engagement as character fulfillment

because it is more than human connection and interaction; it is developing my inner capacity of openness, humility, and grace. It is being humbly aligned with a greater sense of self and selflessness. An important creed to live by is to consider others as I would want to be considered.

**Reflection four.** When I speak of consideration for others, it is important to talk about state of mind and demeanor in daily life. Throughout my leadership journey, I endeavoured to conduct myself with equanimity. For me that meant, being calm, composed, and grounded, responding to circumstances and life in general with an unaffected, steady approach. This was not always an easy thing to maintain. There were many occasions when I found myself reacting to the emotions of a situation or a person, and then afterwards on quiet reflection, realized it was not about the incident, or me. It was not about reaction and response, but rather remaining in a centered, neutral state of mind.

**Reflection five.** I think equanimity is tested the most when faced with real adversity. Some of the most enlightened moments in my life were born from tragedy and pain. I believe that it was through the struggle, suffering, and testing of my spirit, that I finally surrendered to the acceptance of what was, and rose above the anguish to a heightened awareness of my self, my purpose, and my creativity. Adversity taught me about my strengths and weakness, my faith, and my fears.

I learned valuable lessons from adversity. Before my cancer diagnosis and treatment, I was immersed in the academic learning that I was so passionate about, but I was hard pressed to find a work-life balance. In retrospect, I felt my body said, “enough, if you are not going to care for yourself, then you will be forced to do so”. I was caring for everyone else and forgetting to nurture myself. That cancer experience was my awakening call to take care of myself first, because without my health, I would not be there for others.

Today I would say that having cancer gave me the opportunity for a deeper self-discovery. I uncovered more about my being and strengthened my faith in my higher Self. I became more connected to whom I truly am. In those reflective moments, I asked myself in what ways was I stronger for what happened and how had my view of myself and my relationship to the larger world changed? I learned to trust in my endless resiliency and work on being fearless. Yet even now there are times that I have to reach into the inner calm that my mindfulness practice gives me in order to work at removing the fear that surreptitiously creeps in. However, I find that those instances are becoming fewer and fewer.

I found that I let go of “stuff” more easily and focused on just being. I live in the here and now, grateful for each day, blessed that I have supportive and caring people in my life. I felt I became more courageous and honest in my examination of myself. With this self-understanding, I attended to healing my body, mind, and spirit.

How has this experience impacted my leadership? Because I am much more aware of protecting and preserving my wellbeing, I have a heightened sense of the internal and external forces that can batter it about. In the future, if I can share one lesson with the people I work with, it would be to do everything in their power to safeguard their own health and wellbeing. I see more and more pressure put on staffs in schools to do more with less, to participate in extensive professional development that takes precious time away from actual teaching. In my experience, educators are feeling overwhelmed by this additional burden. They believe that they are being pushed further and further away from having the time and energy to connect with their students and the heart of teaching. I witnessed educators, both novice and veteran, who left the profession because of that disconnect and the associated stress of it. My hope for the future of the educational system would be that it embraces the spirituality of an inspired leadership that

would understand and incorporate wellbeing into professional practice.

After taking that graduate course, I realized that I wanted to continue with my academic and spiritual journeys. I decided to pursue a PhD in Educational Research, specializing in Leadership. The topic for my dissertation evolved out of a desire to share the impact of mindfulness on my personal and professional ways of being.

### **Living Through Catastrophe**

Almost a year after starting my PhD program, there was a catastrophe that caused me to rely even more on the strength and sustenance gained from my mindfulness practice. In June of 2013, a disastrous flood occurred in High River, the town where I live. My home was devastated and I lost many irreplaceable belongings. I truly believe that my practice of mindfulness was instrumental in helping me deal with this calamity, become more resilient, and recover from the decimation. It took a year to repair the damage done to my home and come to terms with the loss. This experience brought me to an even deeper sense of self-awareness and attunement.

#### **The High River Flood**

The morning of the flood, I cleaned my house and then got ready to drive into Calgary to meet a friend later in the afternoon. While I was in the city, my cousin who lived near me called and said that High River was flooding and people were being evacuated from their homes. She suggested that I stay overnight in Calgary and she would give me an update in the morning. Unfortunately, her news the next day was not good. Canadian Armed Forces were mobilized to cordon off the town and they were not letting any residents return to their houses. People were being sheltered in school gymnasiums and community centers in nearby towns.

It took two weeks before we were permitted back. I was lucky because I had a place to stay in Calgary during that time. Many other High River residents were not so fortunate. The

circumstances of waiting and not knowing the condition of my house and belongings were the hardest part for me. Because of the forced evacuation, the Alberta government set up a disaster relief program that was responsible for assisting flood victims. Part of that relief was a small amount of money to help cover the cost of living expenses while victims were “homeless”. I remember standing in line for ten long hours in the hot July sun to sign up for compensation. What stood out for me most vividly about that experience was the kindness and compassionate support of strangers. Women and girls from a Hutterite colony nearby came to bring snacks and hand out water as well as to cook dinner. At the end of that exhausting day, just before they left, they stood around in a group and sang two lovely German songs to bolster our spirits. Then they passed out blankets and wraps to keep us warm when the night air became chilly. During the house cleanup process that followed, there were many more acts of kindness from strangers.

When we were finally allowed back to our houses, I remembered feeling a deep sense of dread at the prospect of the damage I would encounter. When I arrived at my home, I could not open my front door because of the damage that was done to it by the RCMP. They tried to ram the door in, but only succeeded in breaking the lock so they were not able to enter. My first task was to get a locksmith to come out and replace it, which took a couple of hours. Once I was able to get inside and survey the damage, my heart sank.

There was a gloomy eeriness in the house and when I looked down into the stairwell of the basement, I could see that the flood damage had reached the landing indicating that at one point the water must have been at a height of nearly two meters. There was grey mud and black mold all the way down the basement stairs. It appeared that the floodwater had receded sometime during the last two weeks and had left about fifteen centimeters of thick grey sludge. I made my way down into the basement and despairingly surveyed the wreckage. There had been a

combination of floodwater and sewer backup that had taken the contents of the basement and fiercely tossed them around as though they had been put in a giant blender and whirled at high speed. It did not look like there would be much or even anything to salvage. I had many treasures stored down there including family albums, pictures of my mother who had passed away when I was thirteen, my children's mementos, almost all of my books and educational materials – a lifetime of memories and precious objects.

My neighbours and I were not allowed to start the cleanup process that afternoon and instead had to wait until the following morning. Early the next day, I went to the fairgrounds where a temporary relief centre was set up. I asked for volunteers to come and help me. I was so fortunate to get help from those volunteers, along with my daughter, son-in-law, and friends. My father, who was eighty-three, came as well. I owe everyone who gave her and his time and energy to assist me in the cleanup a tremendous debt of gratitude.

So many people arrived from all over to help the residents of High River. We would never have been able to do what was needed without their generous assistance and support. It is in such catastrophic times, that human goodness, kindness, and selflessness becomes truly evident and is so appreciated.

The cleanup of my house was an arduous and extremely onerous task. Gutting the basement took several days and then it needed to be thoroughly cleaned and remediated to eradicate the black mold that was not only rampant in that location, but in other areas on my main floor as well. This remediation process took several months and during that time my house was deemed “Not Fit for Habitation” (NFH) by Alberta Health on two separate occasions. I was not able to move back into my house until January, 2014.

I do not think I could have recovered from this calamity and maintained my equilibrium

without my mindfulness practice to sustain me. Mindfulness helped me to breathe deeply and remain calm even though at times all I wanted to do was cry because of the horrendous and overwhelming task ahead of me. It allowed me to stay focused on the task at hand regardless of the many things that needed to be dealt with. It helped me to remain patient and positive in spite of the hardships (for example, my insurance company initially denied my claim and it took awhile for them to change their position and agree to coverage). Finally, my mindfulness practice supported me in coming to terms with the loss of my treasured belongings and let go of my attachment to things. I eventually saw the flood as a grand opportunity to simplify and declutter my life and deemed it my “spring cleaning project”.

The flood forced people to their limits and beyond. It created great loss for High River residents that resulted in many of them becoming emotionally and spiritually wounded. To recover from this woundedness, individuals had to summon incredible fortitude and resiliency to continue on and overcome the horrendous challenges. George (2009) defined resilience as “a combination of heartiness, toughness, and buoyancy of spirit ... that is necessary to get through struggling moments, bounce back from adversity, and adapt to external stress” (p. 42). He further argued, “the best way to become more resilient is to develop oneself into a calm, compassionate, and adaptable [human being]” (2013, p. 1).

How does a person access or develop this resilience? I credit mindfulness for making it possible for me to do so. Mindfulness “provides a skill and discipline that aids in reducing stress and creates a collected calmness,” along with the clarity and focus that are necessary “to strengthen the capacity for resilience” (Bearance, 2013, p. 1). After seeing the extensive destruction that the flood did to my home, I realized that I “needed to collect myself and draw from the breath and energy of the mindfulness practice that had been my salvation” during my



recovery from the pain and suffering caused by cancer treatments (Bearance, 2013, p. 9). My inner voice kept repeating, “just breathe, [take] one small step at a time” (p.9). What happened next was that I was able to will:

myself to breathe slowly and deeply. I focused my attention on each in- breath and out- breath, becoming aware of my mind and body connection and consciously relaxing the tension in my neck, shoulders, and back.

Once I had achieved this calmness, I was able to collect myself, process what I was confronted with and determine what I needed to do to begin the onerous work ahead. I knew that I had to tackle one task at a time.... Attending to these details created a determination and resolve to deal with the situation in the best way I was able to, which in turn eventually brought a resilient mode of managing and going forward. Not an easy thing to do, but necessary. And so the almost insurmountable became possible bit by bit. (pp. 9-10)

Dealing with the cleanup and reconstruction of my home was a lengthy and challenging process that occurred over many months. During that time, it seemed as though there were matters that required my attention and energy every day. It felt like there was a constant barrage of problems and issues that created worry and stress that contributed to my weariness, as well as a deep sense of battle fatigue. Whenever I felt “that pressure of anxiety and anguish begin to resurface again, I [would] call upon my mindfulness practice and ... [was] able to get through whatever difficulty ... [had] arisen in that particular moment” (p. 10).

It is now twenty-three months since the flood’s destruction of my home. The damage has been repaired and I have been living in my residence for over a year now. There is once again a sense of peace and tranquility in it. My home has recovered, but more importantly, so have I.

## **Chapter 7: Summer Reclamation**

*What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters*

*compared to what lies within us.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

Part of my resiliency development included comprehension of my perceptions, reliance on personal efficacy, as well as adaptation to whatever I was confronted with. My recovery process entailed learning to accept, to detach, and to let go. I felt that my crucible experiences thus far were leading me to a higher level of consciousness - a deeper and more expansive awareness. I truly believed that I held at the center of my being the necessary answers and knowledge that I needed to navigate life and to live it fully. I thought that my self-awareness was not so much an exploratory quest as it was an uncovering of my true being.

### **Outward-Inward Uncovering**

*I already reside in the there.*

*It is not necessary to journey far*

*to reach this destination;*

*only to linger in the stillness*

*of my mind and the wisdom of my heart*

*and unwrap the layers of life*

*that have accumulated over time.*

*Once these covers are shed,*

*my soul will be unveiled.*

- D. Bearance, 2015

## **Uncovering Perspective**

I found that dealing with adversity was a great reminder of the important role my perceptions played in my attitude and actions. I believed that if I saw myself as a victim, then I would adopt that persona and all the attendant reactions as well as inactions. Consequently, it would become easy to wallow in defeatism and pessimism. I chose instead to see the challenges that I was confronted with, as opportunities for moving forward.

First, I had to squarely face what was in front of me – what was the actual reality of my current situation and what could I do about it. I needed to see things as they really were and interpret that data from a rational viewpoint rather than an emotional perspective. The goal was to reach a clear-headed assessment, problem solve, and marshal my resources. Patterson & Kelleher (2005) maintained that:

how you choose to interpret things that happen to you shapes your overall outlook, whether it is your general outlook on life or your outlook specifically connected to adversity that enters your life.... *Realistic optimists* seek to understand fully what is really going on including how they may have played a role in causing the adversity. They also believe that they can make a difference in the future despite the constraints imposed by reality. (pp. 3, 5)

From this Patterson and Kelleher description, I would say that I am a “realistic optimist”. Even though I did not cause my cancer nor cause my house to be flooded, I knew that I needed to be actively involved in the recovery from both of those conditions. I chose to see myself not just as a survivor but also as a thriver.

## **Uncovering Efficacy**

My mindfulness practice afforded me the skills and training to thrive. It gave me the mental acuity and energy with which to collect myself, focus my attention, and concentrate on the

immediate tasks, while under stressful circumstances. I was confident in my capabilities and efficacy because I had already dealt with serious crises in my life. I knew that I could work from my areas of strength: pragmatism, fortitude, determination, patience, perseverance, as well as attention to details, organizational skills, and research capabilities.

Those were the strengths that powered my self-reliance. I understood that I could count on my inner resources to get me through any calamity that presented itself. I could turn a difficult and challenging situation into a positive and constructive experience by viewing it not as an impediment but rather as an opportunity. Challenges were a call for my pragmatism as well as my creativity to come to the forefront and be put to use.

### **Uncovering Adaptability**

I viewed adaptation as the ability to utilize these personal strengths to take constructive action to deal with the matters at hand and improve the situation. I saw change as inevitable and constant, so it was up to me to make the most of this precariousness and to view it as an opportunity for growth and development. For me, to adapt, implied movement – going forward, not being stuck in a situation. A good example of my adaptability was leaving high school administration and moving to elementary administration. Additionally, over the space of two months, I went from teaching Grade 12 Social Studies 30, a Diploma exam course to teaching Grade 2 Social Studies. Even though I liked being in a high school setting, elementary was a delight that I would not have experienced if I had not decided to make a change and explore other avenues.

I had no desire to tarry in the status quo for too long but rather to move toward the promise of possibilities and potentialities. For as much as I was able to do so, I chose to shape the future rather than be molded by it. George (2009) claimed that “a crisis provides a unique opportunity

to create transformative change” within one’s self and in one’s interactions with others (p. 75). There would always be forces beyond my control that had the ability to take away everything that I held dear except for my capacity to choose how I would respond to that particular situation or crisis. I would not have reign over my circumstances, but I did have control over my feelings and actions. It was up to me then to turn my predicament into something positive and constructive, to overcome adversity with personal achievement and mastery.

### **Expanding Beyond From Within**

One of my goals was to become more consciously aware of what was happening around me – to reach a state of attentive attunement. This awareness applied to my self, to others, as well as to the situation I found myself in. Through the practice of mindfulness, I had a greater capacity to read people. One of the questions I asked was: what is really going on here? Then I determined how I was contributing to the situation and what impact this had on me and on the others who were involved. I believed that for the most part, everyone was just doing the best that they could with what they had available to them in that particular instance. What remained was to understand people’s motivations, perceptions, and attitudes.

Once I acquired a better understanding of the internal and external elements of the situation, I could then choose how to handle the matter at hand. That required acceptance, detachment, and letting go in order to work toward a positive and productive future of meaning and purpose. What became significant was to fulfill my highest inner potential and nurture that potential in others.

### **Acceptance**

A key shift in my outlook on life occurred when I realized that my relationships and possessions were transitory and impermanent. That was critical in handling the loss. The flood

reminded me of this. I found that repeating the Serenity Prayer was very helpful in living through catastrophe.

*God, Grant me the  
serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the  
courage to change the things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.*

- Reinhold Niebuhr, 1987, p. 251

I accepted that I was responsible not only for my feelings and actions but also for my life. For me, acceptance did not mean being passive rather it was an engagement in life as it was. With acceptance, came an emotional calm and a clarity that enabled me to see the broader picture. Mindfulness taught me how to reach a state of nonjudgment that honoured plurality and diversity. What replaced judgmentalism was an unemotional discernment. I surrendered my desire to change or control others and accepted them for who they were. Along with that, I found my ability to laugh at my self and life's silliness.

In my healing and recovery, it was imperative for me to find self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, and self-love. It was crucial to accept myself with all of my human imperfections and shortcomings and to be at peace with who I was. It was vital to forgive myself for past transgressions and to reach a place where I did not harbor regrets. It was essential to love myself unconditionally in order to achieve full and complete acceptance. I accepted myself as I was, and things as they were, which provided me with the ability to reside in uncertainty and ambiguity.

### **Detachment**

I found that acceptance brought me to a place where I could more readily detach from

thoughts, perceptions, and things. According to a core Buddhist teaching, nonattachment was expressed as “nothing is to be clung to as I, me, or mine” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 53). That idea of clinging was significant. As Kabat-Zinn affirmed:

... it is our attachment to the thoughts we have of who we are that may be the impediment to living life fully, and a stubborn obstacle to any realization of who we and what we actually are, and of what is important, and possible. It may be that in clinging to our self-referential ways of seeing and being, to the parts of speech we call the personal pronouns, I me, and mine, we sustain the unexamined habit of grasping and clinging to what is not fundamental, all the while missing or forgetting what is. (p. 54)

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (2010) related this story of the Buddha’s advice for detaching from things:

A very miserly man once came to see the Buddha for advice. He was totally incapable of giving anything away. The Buddha told him to begin training himself by giving small objects with his right hand to his left hand. As the man slowly got used to the idea of giving, the Buddha encouraged him to give small things to members of his family, then to friends, and then to strangers. Eventually, the man was able to give away whatever he had with great joy to anyone he came across. Through gradual familiarization, great aims can be easily achieved. (p. 320)

The flood was the impetus I needed to take a long hard look at what I had accumulated in my life thus far. I decided to go through the main floor of my house and anything that I did not use or wear on a regular basis I loaded into boxes and bags and drove to the goodwill store. I believed that nonattachment played an essential role in generosity.

I also threw out some of the mementos that I still possessed. I was determined to pare down

my life to its simplest essentials. Hawley called this action, “untethering” which is the idea that “true personal freedom comes from being not caught up or attached to the stuff of worldly life” (p. 115). He further explained that untethering:

is not giving up of [all] worldly things; it’s a releasing from the desire for and dependence on those things. Thus, you don’t relinquish enjoyment of life; rather, you set yourself free from the inevitable disappointments and disquiet that come from being addicted to these trappings, these snares of life. (p. 116)

Understanding that distinction was important to me. I still appreciated and enjoyed the esthetics of my surroundings, my art and beautiful pictures, for example, without being bound to them.

That process of untethering further led me to examine the mental baggage that I was keeping in my mind’s closet. I knew that there were emotional attachments and past traumas that I had to find a release from. I found this statement of Hawley’s to be profound:

detachment means letting go of attitudes and beliefs that hold us back, as well as letting go of belongings. It requires lopping off old emotional traumas that consume energy and interfere with moving ahead. It even means becoming less entangled with family – not abandoning them but loving them with fewer strings. (p. 116)

According to Hawley, “releasing ourselves from the emotional bonds of family” meant that “loving more purely”, was not abandonment. You were not abdicating your responsibilities and you did not “necessarily leave physically....It’s a matter of giving up dependency on others and creating the freedom so that they can do the same” (p. 119). I was reminded of Kahlil Gibran’s (1923) poem, *On Children*, that I read at my daughter’s wedding dinner. The poem spoke of having responsibility while relinquishing possessiveness:

Your children are not your children.



They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.

They come through you, not from you.

And though they are with you, they belong not to you.

For they have their own thoughts,

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but strive not to make them like you,

for life goes not backward nor carries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth....

(pp. 15-16)

Giving up dependency in relationships was important in freeing one's self to create a healthy balance in life.

### **Letting Go**

In my experience, the release of emotional attachments brought me to a healthier mental place. I found Hawkins' (2012) book, *Letting Go: The Pathway Of Surrender*, offered tremendous guidance for this process of emotional detachment. I realized that the emotions that were behind my thoughts needed to be released before true healing could take place. By letting go of negative emotional impediments, I was better able to cultivate an inner peace. Hawkins stated:

The mind, with its thoughts, is driven by feelings. Each feeling is the cumulative derivative of many thousands of thoughts. Because most people throughout their lives repress, suppress, and try to escape from their feelings, the suppressed energy accumulates

and seeks expression through psychosomatic distress, bodily disorders, emotional illnesses, and disordered behavior in interpersonal relationships. The accumulated feelings block spiritual growth and awareness, as well as success in many areas of life. (p. xxii)

The main thrust of this process was to focus on feelings rather than thoughts. In order to do that, I had to become a witness of the feeling instead of an “experiencer”. Hawkins declared that, “... you are not your feelings, ... the real ‘you’ is merely witnessing them. ... self-awareness is increased much more rapidly by observing feelings rather than thoughts” (pp. 21, 34).

Letting go of feelings was useful in day-to-day situations but even more crucial in catastrophic times. The issue became one of learning how to deal with the overwhelming emotion that was associated with the crisis. What was key was finding a way to disassemble the emotion and look at its component parts (Hawkins, 2012). Hawkins maintained that, “handling a crisis from the emotional rather than the intellectual level will shorten its duration dramatically” (p. 39). In crisis situations, the mind tended to constantly replay what had happened. Unless “the underlying emotion is surrendered, the thoughts will be engendered endlessly” which made the situation very difficult to recover from (p. 39). According to Hawkins, “every life crisis carries within it the kernels of a reversal, a renewal, an expansion, a leap in consciousness, and a letting go of the old and a birth of the new” (p. 40).

**Unresolved crisis.** Sometimes life wounded me and I did not allow myself to heal completely. Often a crisis passed and I thought that I had dealt with it, but later learned that there was, what I called, “residue” left behind. Another incident occurred that I felt was unrelated, yet the mind-tape from the previous crisis resurfaced. That was when I decided to investigate more closely and uncover the residual feelings. To handle that past residue, I found it

helpful to look at my perspective and reframe it.

Frankl's book, *Man's Search For Meaning*, identified this approach as "logotherapy" and he described it as finding a new context for an event that caused unbearable pain and suffering (1959, 2006, p. 98). He wrote, "emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it" (2006, p. 74). Therefore, my comprehension of this statement was that I would recover from traumatic experiences if I saw them clearly for what they were, and then gave them a new meaning. For example, the flood was a destruction of my home but not a decimation of my spirit. The flood gave me the opportunity to clear myself of my possessiveness of belongings and find meaning in my inward uncluttering and detachment. Frankl's own horrific experiences in the Nazi concentration camps were eventually seen by him as an opportunity to achieve inner mastery. He stated, "... everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (2006, p. 66). Tragedy and extreme adversity might be found in anyone's life. As Boleman and Deal proffered, "Spirit springs from what you make of it [tragedy]. Wounds provide an eye to find new possibilities" (2001, p. 59). To choose my attitude about a catastrophe that had befallen me freed me to find my own course through it. This lesson added an expansive and profound meaning to my life.

### **Expanding Awareness**

I learned that when things happened, it was not necessarily about me, but rather it was about me being present while the universe was unfolding. Ruiz (1997) offered this core agreement in his practical guidance to personal liberation: "don't take anything personally" (p. 47). He further explained:

As you make a habit of not taking anything personally, you won't need to place your

trust in what others do or say. You will only need to trust yourself to make responsible choices. You are never responsible for the actions of others; you are only responsible for you. When you truly understand this, and refuse to take things personally, you can hardly be hurt by the careless comments or actions of others.

If you keep this agreement, you can travel around the world with your heart completely open and no one can hurt you. You can say, 'I love you,' without fear of being ridiculed or rejected. You can ask for what you need. You can say yes, or you can say no – whatever you choose – without guilt or self-judgment. You can choose to follow your heart always.

(pp. 60-61)

This was a significant insight for me and it was an agreement with myself that I intentionally chose to live by.

### **Openness**

By opening my heart and mind to a larger reality, I gave my full attention and presence to others. Openness was an invitation for me to be accessible and receptive without preconceived notions or assumptions. I unobtrusively observed, deeply listened then wholeheartedly engaged in interactions. With this receptive participation, came an authentic interconnection.

Openness honoured the dignity of each individual and respected the divergent thinking that often occurred. I may not have agreed with the position taken, but I respected an individual's right to have her or his viewpoint. I did not make judgments because an agreement could not be reached. I respected other perspectives and gave them attentive consideration. It was through having an open mind and heart, that I gained access to a deeper awareness that went beyond ordinary experience. It reinforced for me that I was a part of something much greater than my being, that I was connected on a grander scale.

## **Compassion and Loving-kindness**

Love is the quintessential connection. It begins with self-love and self-compassion and expands outward from there. Self-love is accepting yourself and being content with who you are. Self-compassion is being kind and generous to yourself and believing that you are deserving of the very best that life has to offer. Hawkins affirmed that loving-kindness “is a way of being that transforms everything around you because of the radiation of that energy” (2012, p. 175).

Love gave me the capacity to expand myself, to support and nurture others. Love became a spiritual intention and a way of relating to life and to people. Compassion and loving-kindness were boundless and complete in and of themselves. There was no expectation for gain, return, or reward. I found that the more I loved, then the more expansive my love became. I believed that loving-kindness was crucial in the development of a deeper sense of self and a heightened sense of others that was vital to becoming a mindful educational leader.

### **Deeper Awareness**

A heightened sense of self and others brought me to a lighter state of being. Feelings of heaviness were replaced with states of peace and serenity. Deeper awareness led to the restoration of my true self and the wholeness of my mind, body, and spirit connection. I wrote a poem to capture that understanding.

It read:

#### *Quinta Essentia*

*Unburdened from fear and despair,*

*causes a shift in awareness.*

*Out of adversity and suffering,*

*arises a transcendence to grace.*

*My self is everything, fully formed, and complete.*

- D. Bearance, 2015

For “S” who helped me see.

I was truly grateful for being reconnected to the essence of my being. I felt that I was more alive than I had ever been.

## **Interlude**

I pause once more to connect what passed before with what is to follow. Chapters Four through Seven were the scholarly narration of my professional educational leadership career and my personal crucible experiences that initiated and strengthened my mindfulness practice. What comes next in my Scholarly Personal Narrative is a review and analysis of both my professional and personal experiences and the data that was garnered from them.

This next section of my dissertation begins with Chapter Eight that contains a parallax vantage analysis for the purpose of identification of applicable themes, an integral component of my methodology. After the themes were “uncovered” and analyzed, I reviewed what I learned about the applicability of mindfulness to educational leadership. Lastly, I examined the role that mindful educational leadership might play in the cultivation of a community of grace in educational settings. In my view, the practice of mindfulness in schools would create a holistic learning and positive relational environment that would result in a respectful, compassionate, attentive, and aware dynamic that would ultimately promote and inspire such a community. This Chapter is followed by a final summation in Chapter Nine that arrived at a conclusion and drew implications from my Scholarly Personal Narrative. The dialogic threads and narrative themes were collected and summarized for an encapsulation that would then offer a broader view for further research and contributions to the scholarly literature and educational leadership field.

## **Chapter 8: Parallax Vantage**

*Opening into an expanded aperture of parallax vantage,  
shifting perspectives and reflexive interpretations  
convey transformational pieces of knowing and becoming.*

- D. Bearance, 2015

### **Explication**

The word, “parallax” comes from the Greek word, “parallaxis” which means change, alteration (Online Etymology Dictionary). Parallax is “the apparent change of location of an object against a background due to a change in observer position or perspective shift” (Sameshima, 2007, p. xi). Vantage is defined as a “position giving a strategic advantage, commanding perspective, or comprehensive view; the position from which something is observed or considered” (Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary). I used parallax vantage as an analysis process for standing back from an experience or gaining enough distance to see emergent patterns or themes. It allowed me to see all the research pieces (the data), laid out in front of me, in order to provide a way of looking at the whole or totality of my professional and personal experiences.

This viewpoint of experience offered a broader expanse of the overlap of inner sojourning with outer world connection. Such an overview provided an opportunity to place recollections and perspectives beside each other. So essentially I relayed the experience (this was the data), collected each piece of data, laid all of the data out for review, and then stepped aside from the collection of data (which created a shift in the sight line).

When I stepped aside from the data collection, I was able to view the experience and the narration of the experience with a wider lens, to look at it holistically, as the totality of the



experience as well as a delineation of its individual elements. Time and distance from the actual experience gave me a discerning eye because I had the space to stand back and look dispassionately and analytically at the event. A parallax vantage provided the reflexive distance between my self, the experience, and the self that I am now, looking back on the event with a wider-angle aperture. It enabled me to view the outer limits of the action as well as the inner workings of the experience that permitted me to see the complexities, the textures, subtleties, and nuances. The dimensions of the experience were then seen more clearly.

Because of my crucible experiences, there was a change in my observational position that provided a new sight line. Crises disrupted the natural inclination, behaviour, perspective or habitual tendencies and caused me to re-assess what mattered most. There was also a re-examination of who I was, and how I wanted to live my life in addition to how I wanted my life to be from the point of crisis forward. Therefore, I was altered and changed because of the crises and there was a shift in my sight line of the event or experience. The crises produced a parallax vantage in that they challenged and compelled me to look at my life and my experiences in a different way, to see it and them from a different viewpoint or perspective. In widening my visual observational field, I gained depth perception. To sum up, at the time of the event, through narration (of data that included epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts), I relayed what I was experiencing, thinking, feeling, and perceiving in that moment or duration. After I collected the data, and with an amount of life intervention (time and distance, change in perspective and focus), I was able to view the situation with a new line of sight, a new altered perception. This process of parallax vantage then allowed me to analyze and understand my experiences from the viewpoint of my changed being because of the crucible experiences that I lived through. This offered another dimension of perception not only for

myself but for the reader as well.

A parallax vantage allowed me the opportunity to view “shifting subjectivities and situatedness which directly influenced the constructs of perception, interpretation, and learning” (Sameshima, p. xi). This parallax view broadened and illuminated the collection of past experiences, thus it opened the self-examination process to reveal the background context, to see the frame of perception, and to acknowledge the distance between there and here, then and now. The parallax viewpoint gave me an analysis process with which to step outside of my past to obtain a clearer, unimpeded view of aspects of my self, my relationality with others, and the contextual world of my life experience. This afforded me an expansive view of the elements that powerfully shaped my thinking and impacted the evolution of my being. To access the parallax vantage required a detached stance, “an open mind, ... and a reflexive gaze” that allowed me to “enter into a space of personal, artful, yet scholarly inquiry” (Irwin et al., 2001, pp. xix, xx). From this viewpoint, the parallax “space, distance and lens” let both myself and my reader see the themes and their significance that were required for sense and meaning making (Sameshima, p. 56).

### **Steps Within the Process**

In order to make sense of the themes in my data, I wanted to reach an expansive space and broader distance between my past professional and personal narratives and my current lens of those life experiences. With a reflexive perspective from an altered life position, I felt I perceived more of a particular situation and gained a deeper understanding. This allowed me to be present in the past, to uncover the themes through a more acute awareness, to pick up on nuances that I might have overlooked before, and to see the connections of narrative observations. To attain more clarity and acuity, I practiced insight meditation combined with

Hatha yoga and listened to soothing, uplifting music to put me into a contemplative state of being.

### **Insight Meditation**

Insight meditation (or vipassana) is defined as “seeing clearly, meditation that focuses on the basic nature of the mind-body process to understand its true characteristics” (Chah, 1985, p. 191). When I practiced insight meditation, I sat quietly and settled into the present moment. I breathed deeply several times and became aware of my inhalations and exhalations. I then attended to the sensations in my body and focused on relaxing and releasing the tensions that resided there. Next, I turned my attention to the thoughts that came into my mind. I acknowledged each thought as it arose, then let it go, and observed it passing away much like releasing a balloon into the air and watching it float upwards and become more distance until it disappears. With silence of mind and stillness of body, I was able to achieve a deeper awareness.

My meditation practice was drawn from the instructional guidance of Chah (1985). For sitting practice, I followed these steps of Chah’s direction to still and concentrate my mind:

- 1) Focus the attention on the breath in an easy and natural way, allowing it to come and go without interference. Use the sensation, the direct experience of the breath, to concentrate the mind. Patiently continue this simple exercise as a way of strengthening the power of the mind to focus and see clearly. Through mindful breathing, concentration and stillness can be developed.
- 2) Once the mind is somewhat quiet and focused, the examination of the workings of the mind and body begins. To examine or contemplate does not mean to think about, but rather to feel, to experience directly, how the world is happening. Examine the aggregates of body and mind. Notice first the body, which is directly experienced as an ever-changing play of

senses, of elements. Examine the aggregates of feeling – pleasant, neutral, unpleasant - changing each moment. Notice the play of perception, of memory and thought, of reaction and volition, of consciousness, the quality each of these experiences brings anew in each moment. See how life is a dynamic interplay of these aggregates arising, changing, passing away. Sense objects, feeling, recognition, reaction, volition, the same process again and again. Notice what experience is like when desire or expectation arises. Notice the causes of suffering. Notice the stillness when the mind is not caught by desire.

3) Is there any part of experience that does not share the characteristics of constant change and fleeting instability, any part that gives lasting satisfaction and is not empty of a self, of an I, of an ego? Where is the self in all this? Examine and you will see how absolutely everything is changing. No me exists, no fixed self, only this process. (pp. 77-78)

Chah declared that looking deeply into experience and its characteristics is “not limited to sitting meditation” (p. 78). An individual could also do a walking meditation that called on walking at a natural pace and observing. Whether sitting or walking, the important point was to “learn to pay attention, and there is nothing you will not understand” (p. 78). This was the essence of the practice.

Concentration meditations were used for the purpose of calming the mind and training it to pay attention and focus. Insight meditation was the “growing perception of impermanence, suffering, and emptiness of self” (p. 79). Mindfulness was developed to see the underlying truth – to watch the arising and passing of thoughts and feelings and realize their transitory nature by letting go of them. Mindfulness training was a systematic process that tapped into an individual’s innate wisdom. This deepest wisdom came from the knowing self (sometimes referred to as the higher Self) which was not the mind or ego self. As Chah asserted, “...

thinking and wisdom are different; in wisdom, the mind becomes still, unmoving, and we are simply aware, simply acknowledging....[with thoughts, we tend to] dwell on, discourse over, and worry about them” (p. 37). Mindfulness practice trained my mind to see thoughts as insubstantial and impermanent, as arising and falling away, which then allowed me to detach from them.

When I was no longer attached to my thoughts, I was able to be fully present. Mindfulness, according to Chah, is “knowing what is here, noticing, being aware. Clear comprehension knows the context in which the present is occurring. When mindfulness and clear comprehension act together, their companion, wisdom, always appears to help them complete any task” (pp. 79-80). Mindfulness training helped me reach a state of calm clarity that enabled me to see things in a new way, with a deeper awareness and understanding. Once I was able to let go of the elements of sensations, thoughts, and feelings, I was more tranquil and peaceful. With practice, I perceived these elements and saw their arising and passing away, without becoming attached to them. I contemplated and examined my life and saw the impermanence and emptiness of all things. Chah instructed that:

the idea of self is merely a concept, a convention.... We call the body a person, my self, but ultimately there is no me, there is only *anatta*, not-self. To understand not-self, you have to meditate.... Once you understand not-self in your heart, the burden of life will be lifted. (p. 173)

The intention of my meditation practice was to know and fully understand my “not-self”, as well as my self as an educational leader, in order to be able to model this practice. When I was fully present in my life, I was more naturally present with others.

### **Hatha Yoga Practice**

Another practice that helped me to be fully present and centered was Hatha yoga. Hatha

yoga is a relaxing, gentle series of stretches and postures that combines breathing with a meditative focus on movement. I found that when I did yoga postures and practiced mindful breathing, it integrated my body and mind. The intentional focus on breathing provided an interface between my mind and body that created a more conscious relationship and connection between the mental and physical aspects of my being. Kabat-Zinn (2005) affirmed that:

Through the practice of mindful yoga, we can expand and deepen our sense of what it means to *inhabit* the body and develop a richer and more nuanced sense of the lived body in the lived moment. In fact, the deep meaning of the word ‘rehabilitation’ actually means to learn to live inside again (from the French *habiter*, which means to dwell, to inhabit)... In this way, if we attend carefully, the body gives to us, informs us, lets us know how it is and what its limits and its needs are in this moment. The reciprocity of relationality between the felt body and our lived experience of it facilitates the actual day-to-day, moment-by-moment learning to live inside again. (pp. 276, 277)

As I moved through the yoga postures, I “inhabited” my body and became attuned not only to the sensations I experienced, but also to the emotional sensations that my body harbored. By connecting my mind and body, yoga assisted me in reaching a balanced state of being that in turn, helped me heal emotionally and physically. It brought an embodied awareness of my physical and mental states that supported a totality of being or wholeness.

## **Music**

While I did yoga, I had meditative music softly playing in the background. Music surrounds and inhabits my life. I have a quote on my desk at home that states, “music is the language of the soul” (Anonymous). This was truly the case for me. I found that soothing and uplifting music resonated deeply within my being and connected with my essence. Before I began my

analysis and writing, I put on meditative music that was calming and provided a tranquil background aesthetic. It opened my receptivity, allowing me to hear intuitive resonances. In addition, it helped my mind, body, and heart to attend holistically to my research and writing.

According to Horden (2000), music was recognized throughout the centuries for its therapeutic benefits in healing the mind and body. In recent times, research focused on the role music played in the science of psychoneuroimmunology (Crowe, 2004; Scartelli, 1987). Studies found that music had a positive impact on emotional behaviour and the biochemical substances within the brain via the limbic system by enhancing overall mood and reducing stress thus improving immune functioning (Radocy & Boyle, 2003). Music improved life quality by providing: (a) a heightened awareness of feelings and sense of vitality; (b) an inspiration for empowerment and motivation to take action; (c) and, a clarity of meaning and coherence in life that could contribute to personal resiliency (Rudd, 1997). From my own experience of listening to music, I affirmed that it helped me to re-establish a positive state of wellbeing by providing: an aesthetic modality for achieving a healing connection of mind, body, and spirit; a soothing, calming, and inspiring effect; and a transcendental medium for my recovery of wholeness and a heightened sense of being alive.

### **Rendering**

Once these steps of insight meditation, yoga practice, and background music were engaged, I was ready to begin the parallax vantage analysis of my research data. This analysis was a critical examination of my Scholarly Personal Narrative that included my epistolary letters, journal reflections, as well as narrative and poetic life texts for the purpose of uncovering applicable themes. As these themes were uncovered, I laid them out like puzzle pieces to see the larger picture that they represented with respect to mindfulness and mindful educational

leadership.

## **Epistolary Letters**

These were the letters I wrote to myself at different points in my professional educational career, first as a teacher, then as a leading education learner, next as an administrator, and finally as an administrator engaged in graduate work for a Master's degree in Leadership and Administration. The contents of the letters captured the thoughts, perspectives, growth and development that occurred during my leadership journey.

As I examined the letters, I realized that two components of awareness were emerging – self and relational. I began with an analysis of the self-awareness and then moved on to the relational awareness found in each letter.

### 1. Letter From An Experienced Teacher To Her Novice Teacher Self

#### a) Self-awareness – recognition and realization of:

- the need to temper a serious nature with a more light-hearted approach;
- dedication and diligence – a high achiever;
- passion for learning;
- finding a balance between work and personal life;
- warmth, kindness, helpfulness, supportiveness.

#### b) Relational-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- the need to move from solitary isolation to collaboration and connection;
- the importance of being open to others, letting others get to know me personally as well as professionally, personal engagement;
- service to others, supporting them in becoming their best selves.

### 2. Letter For Consideration When I Become an Administrator (Leading Education Learner)



a) Self-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- the importance of having a moral compass, integrity, trust, respect;
- having fluidity, adaptability, an ability to read people and the situation;
- the strengths of equanimity, fortitude, caring, compassion, courage, confidence and humility, receptivity and openness;
- duty, responsibility, accountability;
- the significance of gratitude.

b) Relational-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- having mutual respect and trust, goodwill;
- listening with both the head and heart;
- the importance of cooperation, collaboration, connection.

### 3. Letter to My Administrative Self

a) Self-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- having patience and fortitude;
- being an optimistic pragmatist, a continual learner;
- the necessity and ability to assess the current reality, use discernment;
- being responsible, dependable, accountable, doing best work – high achiever;
- caring, nurturing, and supportive;
- effective communication skills;
- reflective practitioner;
- the importance of learning from my mistakes;
- being true to myself, being guided by what matters most, what truly matters;
- mindfulness, paying attention to the present moment;

- enjoy the work that I do.

b) Relational-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- building personal connections, having authentic relationships;
- caring about others, nurturing and supporting, and being of service;
- developing a collaborative learning community where members are productive and interdependent;
- being an observer and paying attention to staff dynamics.

4. A Letter to Articulate My Beliefs (Personal Credo for Leadership and Administration)

a) Self-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- dignity, integrity, equanimity, and grace;
- being grounded and centered;
- compassion, gratitude;
- living in the moment;
- attitude as a conscious choice;
- passion for continual learning;
- creativity, curiosity, hope, resiliency, courage;
- being responsible, dependable, accountable;
- being reflective, generative, adaptive;
- finding a balance between work and personal life.

b) Relational-awareness - recognition and realization of:

- service to others; support people in being their best selves;
- acceptance of others, nonjudgment, openness, mutual respect, fairness and consistency, sensitivity to others' needs;

- believing in the decency and goodness of others and honoring their dignity;
- reaching and connecting with others, collaboration;
- acknowledgment and celebration of others' accomplishments;
- meaningful, fluid, and humanistic leadership;
- a belief in a holistic approach to education that encourages transformational growth, intellectual mastery, innovative creativity, social consciousness, and spiritual depth.

In summation, from a parallax vantage of that data, I saw a professional transition from isolation to connection and collaboration, from a less task-oriented focus to a more people-oriented focus, and from an authoritative to an authentic demeanor. There was evidence of an ongoing passion for learning and a desire for growth and development. Throughout the data there was consistency in the following attributes: integrity, respect, compassion, patience, responsibility, dependability, diligence, and dedication. It was apparent that what mattered to me, was to be the best person I could be and to support others in becoming their best selves.

It was clear that as I moved further along in my professional career, there was a tendency toward openness, acceptance, nonjudgment, and adaptability. I became more of a reflective practitioner and began to define and articulate my beliefs and values, not only for myself but to share them with my colleagues. As time passed, I witnessed myself becoming more confident, more creative, more generative, and more grateful. No matter what happened, I felt fortunate to be able to learn and grow. I started to realize the importance of living in the moment and finding a balance between work and personal life. Descriptors such as optimistic, hopeful, resilient, fluid, humanistic, and spiritual began to appear. Finally, two significant qualities that were highlighted for me were: equanimity and grace.

## **Journal Reflections**

As I continued on my educational path, I found myself participating in a graduate course at the University of Calgary that was called, *Spirituality and Inspired Leadership*. The course assignment entailed writing journal entries about spirituality and leadership. I included parts of those journal reflections and presented them as another source of data that bridged my professional and personal thoughts, observations, and perspectives at that time with a more in-depth introspection. What came next were a gathering and a parallax vantage analysis of those salient pieces.

**Reflection one.** I began to look more deeply into what I considered to be the essential qualities of leadership: character, authenticity, integrity, courage, and perseverance. I realized that I already had the knowledge that I required to move forward in my professional and personal lives. I saw that I needed to reconnect with my innate wisdom, that timeless inner knowing, by focusing inward and becoming more self-aware.

**Reflection two.** I looked for what mattered the most to me, and what I stood for. My foundational qualities were: integrity, compassion, equanimity, resiliency, fortitude, determination, and grace. My intention was to live a meaningful life that was an example for others. I wrote about the respect and consideration I had for people and how I honoured the dignity of each person.

**Reflection three.** I recognized that caring involved compassion and consideration for both myself and for others. It meant that I encouraged my own heart as well as the heart of those people with whom I engaged. To be authentically connected with them, I needed to work on being more open. Although relationships could be challenging, especially for an introvert such as myself, they provided the best opportunity for me to experience more evolved aspects of my

self. As my reflection stated, I intended to further develop “my inner capacity of openness, humility, and grace” to align with my “self-less-ness”.

**Reflection four.** I explained what I meant by the term, equanimity. It was being calm, composed, grounded, and centered, with an unaffected, neutral state of mind together with a steady approach to situations. This refers to the equipoise (a state of equilibrium) in both demeanor and conduct (as defined in Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary) that I wanted to attain and model.

**Reflection five.** I found that my equipoise was most tested and strengthened when I was confronted with adversity. I viewed my cancer experience as a wake-up call to care for myself first as well as an opportunity and a gift of time for deeper introspection. I was more grounded in the here and now and grateful for each day that I had been given. I became more honest and fearless in my self-examination. With this richer self-realization, I could attend to healing my body, mind, and spirit. Cancer taught me to safeguard my health and make its preservation a priority, something I would carry with me in my leadership role. I fully appreciated the importance of wellbeing and the need for its consideration in the workplace. Finally, the *Spirituality in Leadership* course led me to a decision to pursue a PhD in Educational Research, specializing in Leadership.

In summation, from a parallax vantage of this particular data, I viewed the spiritual progression of my professional and personal paths. A closer self-examination brought a deeper self-realization that encompassed uncovering inner truths that included: (a) innate wisdom leads to a higher knowing and more evolved conception of self; (b) authenticity means removing barriers of fear that allow for more openness, and compassion; and, (c) meaningful living is being more self-less as well as relinquishing inconsequential things so that I can focus on inner

development and preservation of my wellbeing.

### **Narrative and Poetic Life Texts**

Within those narratives of my crucible personal experiences with cancer and the flood that decimated my home were found further self-uncoverings and self-understandings. The narrative and poetic texts showed the development of my mindfulness practice and its attendant attributes. A parallax vantage of that data revealed the following insights.

Mindfulness is a skill and self-discipline that is developed through continual practice. It enabled me to reach a higher level of consciousness, with a deeper, more expansive awareness of my self and others. It gave me the clarity and focus with which I was then able to reframe the perspective of my experience, choose a positive, healthy attitude and find a fulfilling life meaning. I learned how to detach from the emotions behind my thoughts as well as the inconsequential things in my life. My mindfulness practice strengthened my resilience and sustained me through recovery and healing from cancer and the flood's devastation. Mindfulness helped me reach a state of attentive attunement of my self and others.

Through the spiritual growth and awareness gained through mindfulness, I learned acceptance, discernment, and nonjudgment. I became more open and adaptable. I reached a place where I could laugh at my foibles and shortcomings as well as life's silliness; that in turn, made me more light-hearted. The practice of mindfulness taught me self-love, self-compassion, and self-forgiveness. I was able to, in Hawley's words, "love more purely" (p. 119). I finally arrived at a place where I was at peace with who I was. Through the acceptance of impermanence, I was no longer afraid of uncertainty or ambiguity and instead embraced change as an opportunity rather than viewed it as a problem.

Mindfulness gave me the skills to work on my inner mastery. I knew that I had an innate

wisdom that allowed me to be self-reliant; therefore, I needed to listen to my inner knowing and follow my heart's intentions. I came to realize that in choosing my attitude about a crisis, I was liberated to make my own course through it. I understood how to "untether" from emotional attachments so that I was able to heal my mind, body and spirit (Hawley). Connecting the mental, physical, and spiritual aspects of my being brought me to a place of wholeness and completeness. I was able to be fully present in the moment and live my life more consciously. This parallax vantage showed me the full view of a narrative of personal and professional growth, development, and transformation that had uncovered a profound sense of my true self.

### **Gathering the Puzzle Pieces**

My Scholarly Personal Narrative revealed several research puzzle pieces with regard to mindfulness. From those pieces, I identified applicable themes, overarching motifs that could be generalizable to others and to living life mindfully. These Scholarly Personal Narrative themes are outlined below.

Mindfulness was both a *practice* and a *process* that:

1. instilled calmness, equanimity, clarity, and focus;
2. built openness, acceptance;
3. cultivated attentiveness, attunement, and presence;
4. developed nonjudgment, discernment, and detachment;
5. strengthened adaptability and resilience;
6. expanded awareness of self and others;
7. kindled loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, and grace.

Are those themes consistent with what the literature ascertained about mindfulness and mindful leadership? As I laid the research pieces of my Scholarly Personal Narrative beside the

literature pieces, it became evident that there was agreement and consistency. First, mindfulness was viewed in both as being a *practice* and a *process* (Delizonna, Williams & Langer, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Langer 1989, 2005; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Second, the practice of mindfulness was described as an “embodied awareness and cultivation of clarity.... emotional balance (equanimity), compassion.... a honing and intentional deployment of attention” (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3). Non-meditative mindfulness was the process of actively noticing new things or creating novel distinctions to improve performance, relationship satisfaction, creativity, and health (Delizonna, Williams & Langer, 2009). Third, the practice of mindfulness enabled an individual to embark upon a reflective inner journey to a place of understanding, knowledge, and wholeness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The insights gained from this self-inquiry helped to awaken a more conscious awareness that led to openness and acceptance (Hawkins, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Marturano, 2014; Ritchie-Dunham, 2014; Ucock, 2007). Fourth, mindfulness aided in developing the skills of attention, attunement, and presence (Chah, 2001; Hanh, 1991; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Langer, 1989, 2005; Marturano, 2014; Ucock, 2007; Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Fifth, through the practice of mindfulness, an individual developed nonjudgment, discernment, and non-attachment (Carroll, 2007; Chah, 2001; Hanh, 1991; Hawkins, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Marturano, 2014; Ucock, 2007). Sixth, mindfulness strengthened adaptability and resilience (Delizonna, Williams & Langer, 2009; George, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Seventh, a mindfulness practice supported the cultivation of a deeper self and relational awareness (Carroll, 2007; Delizonna, Williams & Langer, 2009; Gonzales, 2012; Hanh, 1991; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Marturano, 2014). Finally eighth, mindfulness opened the heart and mind to loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, and grace for self and others (Hanh, 1991; Hawkins, 2012; Kornfield, 2008). In summation, there was strong evidence of congruence



between the research puzzle pieces of both my Scholarly Personal Narrative and the literature.

### **Depiction of the Pieces**

When the research puzzle pieces of my Scholarly Personal Narrative and the literature were fit together, their representation was a conflation of mindfulness with leadership that created a depiction that could be viewed within an educational frame. A picture of the application of mindfulness to leadership in an educational setting was rendered. So what was mindful educational leadership and what were its pieces?

### **Mindful Educational Leadership**

Mindful educational leadership is the embodiment of the states of internal (self) and external (relational) awareness. This includes openness and acceptance as well as the capacity to selflessly and compassionately connect with others in a desire to nurture their highest potential. A deep internal awareness comes through a *practice* and *process* of purposeful reflection and introspection that provides self-understanding and access to inner knowledge. Introspective inquiry connects an individual with her innate wisdom that provides her with the resources to be consciously aware and self-reliant. Relational awareness is honed through care-full attention and attunement which means paying particular attention to others, listening deeply to what they have to say, as well as intentionally noticing and reading their attitudes and behaviours. It also refers to a leader being alert in the present moment in order to recognize what impact her communication and behaviour has on others. Mindfulness training builds an educational leader's capacity to observe and witness without judgment and discern situations as they are and assess events as they occur. This mental skill set comes from a leader's practice of clearing the mind, focusing and concentrating, all of which leads to enhanced clarity, calmness, equanimity, and detachment. There is a concentrated effort to let go of thoughts and the emotions behind them

in order to reach an unaffected, grounded equipoise of nonjudgment and openness.

Openness and receptivity towards others leads to respectful, trusting and authentic relationships. The leader recognizes and acknowledges each person for who she or he is and honours each individual's decency and dignity. There is genuine acceptance of individual diversity and respect for divergent perspectives. Leaders who are mindful are open-minded and open-hearted and fully present in their interactions with others (Marturano, 2014). Mindful educational leadership is selfless engagement and connection that is both compassionate and purposeful. The intention is threefold: first, to model a mindful way of being; second, to promote mindfulness throughout the educational system; and third, to nurture others so that they can attain their highest potential. Olson and Brown (2012) suggested, "at a time when school leaders are facing endless demands, mindful leadership can provide a path to a healthier and more productive school environment" (p.1).

### **Mindful Leadership in Schools**

What would mindful leadership look like in schools? A mindful leader makes the time to regularly and purposefully engage in self-reflection and provides the time and opportunity for others to do the same. This is a leader who models mindfulness attributes – calm, attentive, present, attuned, compassionate, nonjudgmental, open, and receptive – and engages in the simple practice of *pause, breathe, notice, and continue* (or PBNC, my adaptation of Brown's & Olson's, 2015, 'STOP' method, p. 19). Demonstrating and encouraging others to take time to pause, breathe, notice, and continue when faced with an intense, difficult situation allows for a de-escalation process to reduce the tension. A mindfulness practice that encompasses both meditative and non-meditative techniques for calmly pausing and noticing would be key in staying focused on the task at hand and finding pragmatic and equitable solutions at work.

In my experience, schools are often places of pressure and demand overload with high expectations for performance. A mindful leader is someone who promotes a balance between performance and wellbeing by supporting the creation of a school environment where there is positive and healthy personal and professional development. This is a culture that strives to educate the whole person, mind, body, and spirit. I call this kind of educational milieu, a *community of grace*.

### **Community of Grace**

Mindful educational leadership cultivates a community of grace by providing a collective gathering of educators and learners with opportunities and nurturance for them to be independent, innovative, knowledgeable, creative, and mindful beings. Within such a community, there is acceptance of the worth of each person and the acknowledgment of the decency and dignity of the individual. Individuals are taught attention and attunement skills so that they can develop calm clarity, discerning focus, and deeper awareness for themselves and for their interactions with others.

In a community of grace, time is created not only for learning, creating, and reflecting, but also for the encouragement of possibility and potential. Individuals are instructed in how to be open-hearted and open-minded, as well as how to be open to their inner truths. The intention is to encourage individuals to be self-determined, self-reliant, adaptable, and resilient. Instruction is given in how to reframe perspectives, choose positive, healthy attitudes, and detach from negative emotions. Therefore, a community of grace nourishes a capacity for flourishing even in the face of adversity and crisis, to make the best of any given situation, no matter how difficult or challenging. Members of this mindful community of grace are encouraged and supported in dedicating themselves to a cause that is worthwhile and greater than themselves, to move beyond

the self to compassionate consideration of the other. Thus, by cultivating this kind of community, a mindful educational leader provides ample opportunities and nurturance for others to reach their highest potential. Mindful leadership produces a contagion and inspiration that results in a community of grace that goes beyond a professional learning community (that is a deliberate and specific academic collaboration, which in my experience, is often seen by teachers as an act of compliance rather than commitment). My understanding of the purpose of a professional learning community is to move individuals from working in isolation to learning in community. My conception of a mindfully inspired community of grace extends beyond that of learning collaboration to a collective place that honors the individual and supports personal as well as professional growth and development to actualize human wholeness and potential while maintaining a balance between performance and wellbeing. I envision this cultivation of a community of grace as the meaningful and purposeful work of mindful leadership in schools. This kind of leadership would support and nurture the “domain of interiority – the inner life of the growing learner” (Kabat-Zinn, 2014, p. ii). It would also encourage the development of wholeness competencies (Rechtschaffen, 2014). With the support of mindful leadership, teachers would create practical opportunities for their students to become more self-aware, explore their individual ways of being, and develop an attunement to others resulting in a more conscious awareness and connection.

This conceptualization of mindful educational leadership is in its initial stage of depiction. I contend that mindful educational leadership has significant implications for the field of educational leadership and the broader leadership field. Because this construct is in its formative stages of conceptualization, it requires additional clarity and opens the possibility for further research.

## **Chapter 9: Reflexive Reverberations**

*Life's deepest lessons are often where you least expect them. Tragedy is the author of hope.*

*Crisis brings us face to face with our soul.*

- Bolman and Deal, 2001, p. 37

*To truly transform the education sector and the settings in which we work,  
we must first nurture transformation in ourselves.*

- Brown and Olson, 2015, p. 182

### **Completion**

In this Scholarly Personal Narrative, I examined my professional and personal crucible life experiences that told of a journey that led to a deeper awareness and a richer understanding of what it means to be a mindful educational leader. Over the course of my research, collection of data, parallax vantage analysis, and writing, I developed a conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. Through my personal and professional narratives during that research process, I gained insights that led me to an operational definition and description. My data was gathered from epistolary letters and journal reflections written while I was a teacher, an administrator, and an administrator-learner. Other data was captured in the narrative and poetic life texts of my personal experiences that included the crises of: (a) cancer, my diagnosis, treatments, and healing; and, (b) a flood's devastation of my home and belongings along with its subsequent reconstruction and recovery. In addition, I drew from experts' knowledge in the literature to assist in providing a more comprehensive and robust depiction.

I entitled this final chapter, "Reflexive Reverberations" rather than "Conclusions" because it was my hope that the applicable themes that were garnered from my Scholarly Personal Narrative and its analysis would resonate with my readers, invite them to engage in their own

reflections, and reverberate long after the last page was read. This chapter then, presents my completed puzzle picture of mindful educational leadership and includes first, the following depiction of (a) insights gained from the analysis of the data of personal and professional narratives that led to (b) its conceptualization and description. Second, there are perceptions of the factors that might have restricted and limited the research investigation and the narrative elements that highlighted its significance. Third, is the illustration of my dissertation's contributions and implications. Fourth, is the final rendering of closing thoughts as I viewed the completed research puzzle.

### **Puzzle Depiction**

This puzzle depiction of mindful educational leadership was drawn from my personal and professional experiences that were enhanced by the addition of expert offerings from the literature on mindfulness and mindful leadership. I began a description of this picture with the personal and professional insights that were brought together. Then I stepped back and examined the broader image of the conceptualization.

### **Personal Insights**

By utilizing both a mindfulness *practice* and *process*, I found a way to release from the stresses of everyday challenges and the heavy burdens of struggles with crises. My personal experiences helped me realize what it meant to be on a higher path of consciousness, to love and care for my self and others. They taught me how to be silent and still, to find an inner peace, a mindful awareness that allowed for a fuller and more present engagement with others. I came to know my self more deeply, to have a listening and open heart, to be more compassionate, and to be grounded in the realities of the here and now.

As I navigated through the obstacles and turning points of those crucible experiences, my

inner awareness expanded and deepened with the inclusion of further realizations that were as follows. First, everything I needed for my navigation in life can be found within. I can always connect to my innate wisdom to access a higher knowing and an inner reservoir of resources. Second, these momentous life events caused a shift in my perspective on life and my way of being. I focused on what truly mattered and relinquished the inconsequential. I realized that how well I maneuvered my way through crisis and recovery depended upon my choice of attitude regarding life-changing events. I consciously chose to be an optimistic pragmatist and I believed that this contributed greatly to my resiliency and adaptability. Being mindful helped me recover from pain, suffering, and loss; assisted me in building and maintaining healthy relationships; and, gave me the clarity and presence of mind to overcome difficulties and challenges that often felt daunting and sometimes insurmountable.

### **Professional Insights**

Looking back on my professional experiences, I saw the development of a deeper internal and external awareness. From the early years as a teacher, learning her craft, I became knowledgeable in subject matter and realized the importance of connecting and collaborating with others. As I grew into my administrative role, it was apparent that personal engagement and relational awareness were crucial. I became more open and attuned to myself and other people which I believe are important attributes of leadership.

I discovered that an essential component of leadership was the development of a conscious state of being that allowed me to be fully aware and deliberately notice what was happening inside and outside my experience. A mindful *practice* and *process* enabled me: to look deeply inside my self for understanding and insight; to use meditative techniques to calm the mind and body, to acknowledge thoughts and let them go; and, to have active awareness and alert

attunement of self and others in the present moment. Thus, with mindful training, I developed wholeness competencies which were: self-understanding and awareness; clarity, focus, and discernment; acceptance and compassion; as well as an integrated mind and body connection.

### **Conceptualization**

The personal narrative element of this research explored my life-changing and professional experiences with mindfulness and examined them for meaning. I proposed that mindfulness would enable me to function more effectively as a school administrator. It helped me to develop the necessary resiliency to recover from the trauma of cancer and rebuild after the flood's devastation. I gathered those pieces from the concept of mindfulness as well as my experience as a mindful practitioner that drew a larger picture of meaning for educational leadership.

Mindfulness promoted a contemplative process that aided in self-inquiry and the reflective inner journey to self-knowledge and wholeness. It was through contemplation that I was able to live more consciously. A meditative practice developed a greater capacity to become more consciously aware, to connect and compassionately engage, to support and be of service to others.

Therefore, my study concluded that mindful educational leadership is the embodiment of the states of internal (self) and external (relational) awareness. This includes openness and acceptance as well as the capacity to selflessly and compassionately connect with others in a desire to nurture their highest potential. An educational leader's mindful state would provide a deeper awareness of self and others, an ability to witness without judgment and discern events as they occur, and a selfless engagement of mind, heart, and spirit.

A mindful educational leader is someone who purposefully engages in self-reflection to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of herself or himself. Understanding one's self increases



self-awareness and the impact that one has on others. Paying attention and being attuned in the present moment (which is a key element of mindfulness) enhances an educational leader's capacity to notice and discern what is happening in the current situation. An ability to acknowledge thoughts and let them go is both a mental *practice* and *process* that enables a leader to have clarity and focus on the matters at hand. Through a concerted practice that clears the mind and focuses on deep breathing techniques, a leader is then able to reach a place of calmness and equanimity.

This heightened self-awareness, clarity, focus, and calmness provides the foundation for an educational leader's relational awareness, attunement, and openness. Because the leader is nonjudgmental and open, there is a receptiveness to and respect of divergent perspectives that helps to build trust and connectedness. A mindful leader would authentically engage and nurture others in their self-development and realization of their highest potentials.

When educational leaders learn to be more presently aware and attuned to themselves and others, they are "able to accept uncertainty, ambiguity, and challenges with less inner turmoil" (Olsen & Brown, 2012, p. 2). Mindful educational leaders would become role models who serve as inspirational exemplars for their "emotional and social intelligence" (p. 2). I propose that an educational institution would benefit from what Ritchie-Dunham (2014) referred to as "distributed mindfulness" (p. 445). The role of a mindful educational leader would be to assist educators and students to accept uncertainty and deal with the challenges of impermanence. These leaders would demonstrate how to be alert to the current reality of the situation, be sensitive to the emerging aspects as they arise, and attentive to different perspectives which allows them to provide "in-the-moment interventions" and work toward "building shared understandings to enable change" (Dunoon & Langer, 2011, p. 2).

In my view, because of these attributes, mindful educational leadership would be similarly situated within the transformational, servant, and authentic leadership paradigm. This situatedness is centered on: helping others reach their highest potential, to grow personally as well as professionally; having an acute self and other awareness; being compassionately considerate of others' wellbeing and having a desire to be of service; creating an environment where people feel connected and cared about; and, promoting positive psychological capacities for the development of resiliency and wholeness. Mindful educational leaders, who reflect on their life stories and share them with others, reach greater self-understanding, both in a personal and professional sense, and gain clarity and insight (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). To sum up, it seems clear that there are theoretical underpinnings of transformational, servant, and authentic leadership that provide a framework that contributes to mindful educational leadership.

### **Perceptions**

With any scholarly review of a research study, there are perceptions about the elements that provide a robust substantiation and contribution and the factors that delineate and confine the work. This researcher proposes that there is academic significance in providing a depiction of the linkage of mindfulness to educational leadership. However, there are also factors that may be perceived as limitation and delimitation elements of the study.

### **Limitation and Delimitations**

There was a limiting factor that was implicated in this dissertation's depiction of findings. This limitation was a lack of substantive scholarly research on the chosen area of study – mindful educational leadership. As far as this researcher was able to ascertain, there was a gap in the academic literature regarding the explicit mention of the self and relational orientations of mindful educational leadership. The delimitations of this dissertation might be perceived as the

choice of methodology, Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) and the situation of the researcher being the focus of the study.

### **Significance**

However, this study provided an illustration of how mindfulness would be linked to leadership; that in turn, helped to define the mindful educational leadership construct – and would be a natural extension of the current literature. This work would also extend the mindfulness research because there is limited literature on mindfulness as a social or as an educational leadership process. A study that applied mindful relational practices to educational leadership serves to inform and extend that literature. By exploring the *practice* and *process* of mindful leadership that engages others in an institution, this dissertation contributes to both the mindfulness and leadership literatures. The resulting construct of what it means to be a mindful educational leader fills a gap in the academic literature on leadership and offers to educational leaders a reflective and purposeful way of being in the world.

### **Illustration**

Writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative of my professional and crucible experiences enabled me to narrate a mindfulness journey that provided the insights to apply its *practice* and *process* to educational leadership. Gathering the research puzzle pieces together, of what it meant to be mindful and how mindfulness might be applied to educational leadership and further to an institution of education, provided a depiction of the conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. It was this depiction that illustrated its contributions and implications.

### **Contributions**

My purpose in researching and writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) was to convey the meanings captured by my personal and

professional experiences and tell a story that encouraged readers to enter and feel a part of it. The intention was to relate in a way that would evoke readers to feel and think about those experiences as they were reading them, as well as to consider their lives and ways of being in relation to mine. By creating a narrative where the writer and reader are open and receptive to each other, it was in my view, easier to relinquish resistance to different ideas or another way of thinking, which would allow each participant to reach a higher level of consciousness and engagement. Telling my Scholarly Personal Narrative allowed me to express my crucible experiences in what I felt was a deeper and more profound way. It was my hope that I would contribute to knowledge and help others – and myself - by writing a story that the reader and I found meaningful.

A Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley; Nash & Viray, 2013) methodology offered the benefit of moving between narrative and categorical knowledge, which provided an intersection of story with an analytical frame. My utilization of a Scholarly Personal Narrative (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley, 2011; Nash & Viray, 2013) highlighted and explicated the concept and experience of mindfulness which, when aligned with certain types of leadership (including transformational, servant, and authentic), laid the basis for the relevance and importance of mindfulness to the emerging conceptualization of mindful educational leadership. It was the description and understanding of this emerging concept and the suggestion that it would be relevant to a reader concerned with living the life of an educational leader that are the major contributions of this dissertation.

### **Implications**

In addition, this study's findings have significant implications for the field of educational leadership. A study that investigates the emerging construct of mindful educational leadership

would assist in defining the self-orientation and relational-orientation components of this new concept and would be a natural extension of the current literature. This work would also extend the mindfulness literature. Although the practice of mindfulness has been studied for centuries, the focus has been almost solely at the level of the individual. There was limited research on mindfulness as a relational frame or as an educational leadership process. Therefore, a study of the ways in which mindful educational leadership would engage and connect with others in an institution would serve to inform and extend that literature.

Further, I propose that to create a school that wholeheartedly facilitates the development of mindfulness requires an educational leader who is mindful. A mindful educational leader is someone who engages in a mindfulness *practice* and *process* to become more self-aware and attuned to others. Finally, in my view, mindful educational leadership would play a powerful role in the cultivation of a community of grace within educational settings that would enrich professional learning communities to extend beyond academic improvement to create a holistic learning and positive relational environment. This would result in a respectful, compassionate, attentive, and aware dynamic and synergy.

### **Final Rendering**

Life sometimes presents us with a momentous event that might have a far-reaching impact and cause a shift in our perspectives or perhaps even a significant change in our ways of being. This impetus might be the result of a personal crisis or a traumatic event. Whatever the cause, we can become profoundly changed. We may become transformed psychologically and spiritually. This transformation might bring us to the realization that we will never be the same because we have transcended how we were before this critical incident. As a result, we may have a crucible experience that alters who we are and how we are in the world.

Writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative dissertation gave me the opportunity to tell the narrative of my crucible experiences that had a meaningful impact and influence on my professional practice, my personal life, and my way of being. As I narrated my story, gathered my reflections, then further analyzed them with a shift in sight line that was afforded by a parallax vantage, I witnessed the development of a deeper awareness of my self and others. This experiential elaboration assisted me in clearly seeing the impact of my mindful *practice* and *process* and understanding the potential benefits of its application to educational leadership for both professional performance and personal wellbeing. I contend that because of the impetus of my crucible experiences, my mindfulness was strengthened which enabled me to attain not only a deeper awareness, but also more openness, clarity, attunement, equanimity, and resilience. I became more compassionate of my self and others, more generous, and more accepting. I was and still am deeply grateful for each day and endeavour to fully live my life with grace. My crucible experiences transformed me and gifted me with the opportunities to become whole and more alive.

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