

**To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #31**  
**Title: *Mindfulness and Restorative Justice***

“How many of you have two seconds in your life that you wish you had back?”

I asked that simple question at the suggestion of Rev. Jerry Hancock the first time I facilitated the Mindfulness segment of Restorative Justice. It is a highly appropriate question in that context because it gets to the heart of both RJ and the practice of Mindfulness.

That first time, like every RJ Mindfulness session I’ve facilitated since, everybody in the circle raised their hands, including the volunteers. But the discussion from the men in green was particularly powerful — I remember it clearly ten years later.

“I’m spending the rest of my life in prison because of those two seconds,” one man said as the others in the circle nodded. Another man added, “I’ll be seen for the rest of my life as an offender and a dangerous person because of those two seconds. I did what I did, but that’s not who I am.” Again, the others in the circle nodded.

I explained how Mindfulness, in its simplest form, trains us to take a breath between a trigger and an automatic reaction. That breath is huge: It provides enough time to stop an automatic reaction that we might regret for the rest of our lives and, instead, respond mindfully in more appropriate and constructive ways.

Then another man added, “That might be true, but given how much I knew at the time, I don’t think I could have *not* done what I did. I did what I was raised to do, and I didn’t even think about there being another way.”

That comment, in turn, led me to recite a statement that we repeat often in prison Mindfulness circles: *“It’s not your fault, but it is your responsibility.”* We all move through life and act as we do because of countless causes and conditions over which we had absolutely no control and that weren’t our fault.

Were we loved, abused or neglected as children? Did we grow up in a safe neighborhood or a “tough” neighborhood in which survival was a key imperative? Were we raised in privilege or under the thumb of entrenched and systemic racism that robs so many folks of opportunity and hope? These and many other specific causes and conditions are deeply engrained in us and lead us, in the absence of Mindfulness, to automatically react in certain ways, without thinking.

Besides training us to take a breath before we automatically react, meditation and Mindfulness helps us compassionately accept ourselves as we are (*“It’s not your fault”*). We are then free to mindfully reframe how we act and move through the world (*“but it is your responsibility”*).

I'll never forget in a later RJ Mindfulness session when one man, after hearing that explanation said, "I wish I'd know all that before I killed that man."

Restorative Justice is about finding a true justice, of helping both offenders and the community understand the harm done by criminal acts. And that means a true gut-level acceptance by the offender of the harm he or she has done — as well as the harm that had been done to him or her that may have led to that harm. That is precisely where Mindfulness leads those who practice it.

Since my first experience with RJ, I have been moved over and over by how well the two programs fit together. Often, prisoners temporarily leave our Mindfulness groups to attend Restorative Justice. When they return, they are even more aware, more willing and often eager to face their lives with unflinching honesty and, moving forward, to live their lives with integrity. I'm always inspired when I hear a lifer who has been part of the RJ program and/or Mindfulness say, "I want to live the rest of my life with integrity, even if I never leave prison." I'm just as inspired by those who have been through RJ and Mindfulness programs who, as they're about to leave prison say, "This time, I'm know how to do it differently."

~ Mr. Haskin, Restorative Justice volunteer