THE ART OF BEING

Mindfulness from different perspectives

The Common Thread
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THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

WHY DO STUDENTS DISLIKE MINDFULNESS?

"Good heart, balanced mind, healthy body" is our school motto that many of us have probably committed to memory by now. As UWC Thailand students, those are our three "pillars" that differentiate us from the other UWCs. Out of those values, our school places a heavy emphasis on being mindful as a way to achieve a balanced mind. I know that most likely, reading this, some people may have cringed thinking to themselves, "not this again". Some people are tired of hearing about "mindful moments" and that phrase has become a bit of an inside joke amongst groups of students. People laugh and roll their eyes about the idea of mindfulness and taking just a moment to be, but I think that mindful moments and allowing yourself to be aren't small feats. The issue is that there are certain stereotypes around mindfulness that cause some people to view it as a joke or a "hippy" thing. Mindfulness is often associated with yoga or practicing breathing techniques, and yes, they are core practices that support the general practice of mindfulness, but there is a lot more to being mindful than that.

I feel that part of the reason that this idea of mindfulness has a stereotype and stigma around it is because the school does go about the practice of being mindful in redundant ways. Teachers and staff encourage us to be mindful and take deep breaths but they don't always explain the impact and importance of these actions in a way that helps us understand their significance. The result of this is that we are constantly told to be mindful and told to practice breathing or take a moment, but we don't understand what it means to truly be mindful. Not just in a moment, but throughout our lives. We're always talking about mindfulness but because it's drilled into us and repeated over and over again, we don't have a good sense of what it actually is. If something is repeated over and over again, its significance is lost. I think that a lot of times too it is forced upon people, which brings about a natural instinct for students to rebel against it. Personally, I enjoy being told to close my eyes and take a few deep breaths and I appreciate having that opportunity to ground myself. Honestly though, is someone with a big test the next period going to be able to be mindful in that moment? Or are they going to be consumed with thoughts about their test?

I understand the jokes and I understand the stereotypes about mindfulness that float around the school, but there is a saying that behind most jokes, there is truth. I think to some extent, we can all agree that being mindful is important. Even though not all of us may have a grasp on what that concept is or what it means other than taking a few deep breaths, I'm sure that at one point in time we have appreciated the idea and practice. Mindfulness has a fluid definition and I think that it means different things for different people. To me, mindfulness is being intentional with my thoughts and participating in activities where I can be present and grounded in my actions. However, someone else may define it differently, maybe in a more spiritual or artistic way depending on what they value and prioritize. To me, mindfulness practices consist of journaling or tying string bracelets. To someone else mindfulness practices might be the traditional practices of breath work or yoga. It's different for everyone, and I think that is part of what makes it such an important practice that can be incorporated easily into people's lives.

Ainsley Grade 11

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

When telling stories isn't enough

To be a political journalist is to be exposed to constant human suffering. But when you realise you cannot always rescue the people you write about, the limits of your voice become clear. This UWC day, award-winning journalist Natashya Gutierrez reflected on this burden, talking about 'inner peace' and the strength it takes to continue telling stories in a world where pain and conflict unremittingly persist.

Ms Natashya recalled the day that the Taliban took over Afghanistan. She was residing in Sydney, Australia, when all at once her phone exploded with people from an ocean away begging desperately for help. One father of two boys wrote to her "I haven't yet found my son", lacking the knowledge that both of them had tried to escape the country on an American airplane. One body was found, and the other never was.

That moment made Ms Natashya realise that her role as a journalist was not enough to save people. While we may not all be journalists, this is a difficult realisation most of us have faced. It's disillusioning to know that our discussions about conflicts happening on the other side of the world do not directly mediate the devastations. Telling the stories of these tragic events draws us closer to people's suffering while reminding us of how far removed we still remain. Especially for a journalist like Ms Natshya, this dissonance makes up a huge part of your life.



Dealing with this disconnect means accepting the uncomfortable truth that we will never be able to singlehandedly stop all suffering, and that there are limits to the power of goodwill we all hold. What's important is understanding that telling stories and developing our perceptions of the world humanises distant struggles and commits them to the memory of our communities. Feeling helpless against tragedy is heavy emotional labour, but it's not an indicator of the fruitlessness of our efforts.

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After that difficult moment, Ms Natshya devoted time to therapy. One phrase from her sessions stuck with her: "You need to take physical breaks and develop other parts of yourself."

For years, she allowed her role as a journalist to define her identity. But her purpose is tied to more than that; she is a wife, a mother, a reader, and much, much more. Today, Ms Natashya commits to freelance journalism: she accepts a project and takes a break for a few months upon its completion. But mental breaks do not have to be that long. Sometimes, it's just the physical act of standing up, taking a shower, and moving on that motivates you to keep trying.

written by Syna (Gr 12)

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

Grade 11 Camp

While Grade 12 students were starting their second-year journey in August, something exciting was happening for Grade 11. In just two days, our students went through an unbelievable number of activities, such as a Swimming test, Service trips, Kayaking, a Campfire, and a River Walk. Orientation Camp was a great opportunity to get closer, to step out of comfort zone, and of course to try something new. We asked some of our Grade 11 students to share their brightest impressions of the best moments from Orientation Camp!

Campfire

Josh: Personally, out of everything in the orientation camp, the campfire was the best. It was good that everyone from different groups ended the day with an intimate, very special campfire in front of the beach, and how everyone was very happy during the whole experience. Definitely a 10/10, and will definitely treasure my experiences and my friends which I met there.





Kayaking



Ula: Kayaking left the deepest impression on me 'cause my friends and I got caught by some branches. The teacher told everyone to walk on the kayaks and swap places. These are all enjoyable and unforgettable memories.



River Walk

Bavinee: The River Walk was something that was completely out of my comfort zone. I am someone who is anxious about the wilderness and I was expecting to dread the whole experience. To my surprise, the River Walk was my most memorable moment.

By: Adelya, Grade 11

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10



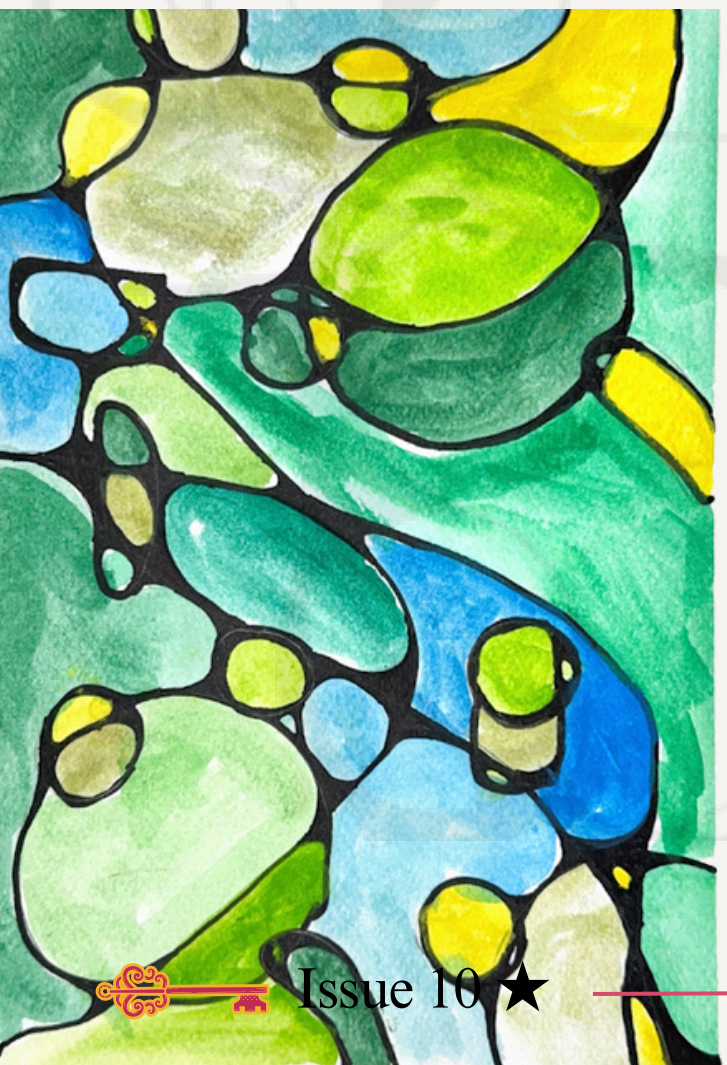
Neurographic art invites us into a meditative practice, where flowing, organic lines emerge without predetermined destination. This therapeutic art form transforms the studio into a sanctuary of mindful creation —a space where judgment dissolves and authentic expression is embraced.

In the gentle rhythm of drawing continuous lines, we discover that art lives in the process, not the outcome.

Each curve becomes a breath, each intersection a moment of choice.

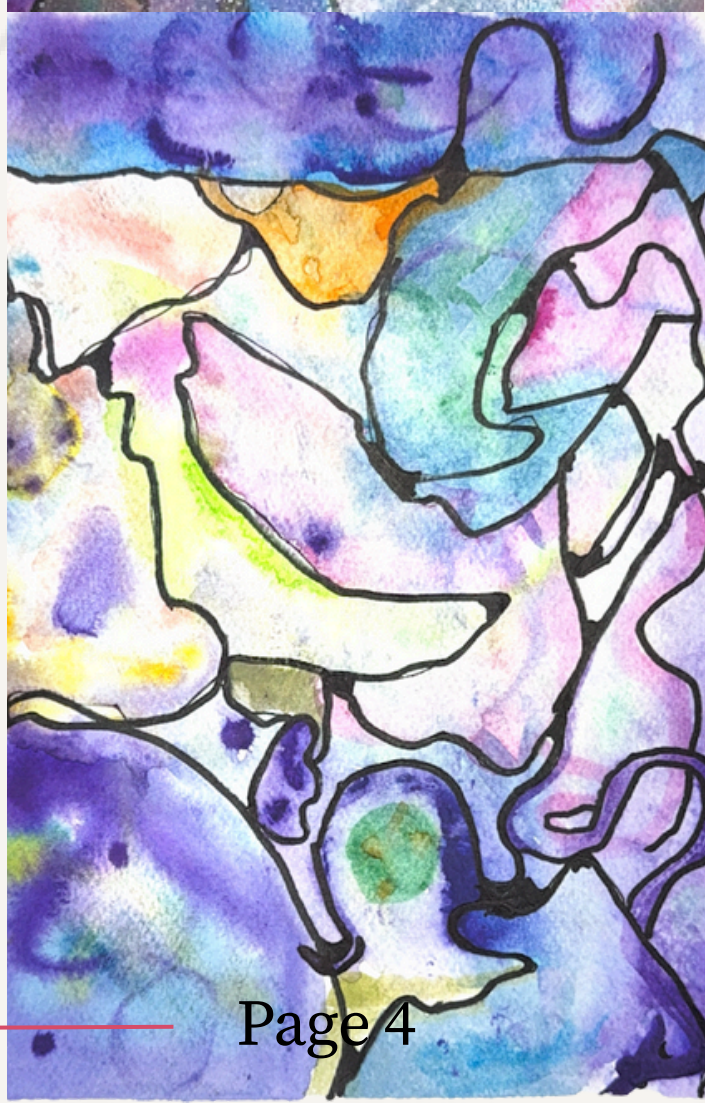


Neurographic Art & Mindfulness: Embracing the Journey Within (Grade 5)



The neurographic method teaches us to trust our intuitive mark-making while our conscious mind steps aside.

Perhaps most powerfully, this practice illuminates the stories we tell ourselves about our artistic worth. "I can't draw." "This isn't good enough." In the neurographic studio, these narratives lose their grip. There are no mistakes—only discoveries. In embracing this process, we embrace ourselves —imperfect, evolving, and endlessly creative.



THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

Dignity and wonder

Human dignity refers to the intrinsic worth and respect that every individual deserves simply by being human (Oxford Review).

Last year, I had one of those days as a teacher that sticks with you, that comes back in flashes years later and takes you right back. Our incredible Peacebuilding Society team was divided on how to approach a thorny issue, and tempers were flaring. The discussion was heated but entirely reasonable - everyone's passion was justified. The issue was hitting so close to the bone for all of us, and in my role as facilitator, I was struggling to stay calm while giving space to students who were deeply invested in the cause.

I could feel my temper rising. I could feel the words rising in my throat like bile. Something like “How dare you speak to me like that” (or an equivalent) was just waiting to explode out of my mouth. It would have felt righteous. It would have fit the bill of teachers that I had growing up. It would have ruined my relationship with the students in the space.

I turned inward. I tuned into my breath. I noticed my body tensing and my own nervous ticks.

I said, “I’m feeling really angry right now. I need a break.” and I walked out of the room.

It wasn’t perfect and I definitely wasn’t a model of perfect poise and grace, but it saved relationships with students that were important to me and ensured that I treated them like human beings.

When I talk about mindfulness, you might often hear me say that it saved my life. It’s true. It also helps me tune into my daily interactions with young people and adults and consider their humanity and my own.

This experience led me to reflect on how mindfulness intersects with our ability to honor others' dignity - a connection that became clearer when in August, our former Head of Mindfulness, Kru Julia, shared an academic article with me that I immediately wanted to share with everyone I could. The academic article, titled "Mindful Mindset, Interconnectedness and Dignity" by Ramaswami Mahalingam shows how our own awareness and presence can lead to seeing and valuing the humanity in others.

Mindfulness can seem abstract, fluffy even, but it is anything but. Being able to find presence in a moment (especially a tough moment), can mean the difference between acting on past patterns or fear-based instinct and taking the time to consider the whole picture.The mindful model in the article lists seven interrelated features: "(a) compassion; (b) sympathetic joy; (c) situated intersectional awareness; (d) negative capability; (e) cultural humility; (f) wonder; and (g) generosity". Some of these are self-evident: of course compassion towards others (and ourselves) can lead to an increase in dignity, but C and D might surprise you.

When we can cultivate awareness of our own power and privilege and shift to understand the "gazes of the other participants", as Mahalingam calls it, we can better navigate challenging conversations. "Negative capability" is a fancy way of reminding us to have a beginners mindset, which is part of any mindfulness training; if we can approach our interactions with others in a way that positions ourselves as learners and not as experts, we open the door to dialogue, rather than just diatribes.

My favourite here is Mahaligam's definition of wonder as either "exuberant openness" or "transformative passion". This fits so well with how I see the work around equity, inclusion, and belonging. If we can sit in a place of openness that is joyful and curious, we can learn more about others rather than excluding them from the conversation. If we can open ourselves to the idea of transforming and, even further, if we can be passionate about our own transformation, the changes that we seek to see in the world are within our reach. What I take away from this article is that we can take the principles of mindfulness "off the mat" and into the world in a way that makes a marked difference in our own lives and the lives of those that we sit in community with. When we are truly present we can create spaces where dignity thrives.



Kru Amanda

Sources on request

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

FINDING PEACE ONE LOW TAPER FADE AT A TIME

MEET DANI: He is an 11th grade Barber from Bolivia and the US. He began cutting hair in 2023 by cutting his dad's hair after feeling inspired by a youtube video. Here on campus Dani is getting back into the habit of cutting hair by giving free haircuts to the community.

For him, cutting hair is more than just a skill, it's an experience. He describes "finding the zone" as a stage of mindfulness.

"I don't know. I'm just very passionate about what I do." Dani Explains "So when I get in the zone, I feel very mindful when I'm cutting hair." "Mindfulness is just when you're in a relaxed state, whether that be through meditation or other things like sports or something you're passionate about."

For Dani, haircuts and low taper fades bring him peace. Now I urge you to ask yourself, What brings YOU peace? Dani's advice to mindfulness? "Just find something you're passionate about and learn how to get in the zone whether that be playing basketball, playing football, singing, swimming, playing an instrument, photography, things like that or even try meditation." In short, Find Your Zone.

To end this short piece, Dani keeps it simple by doing what he loves to stay mindful. And if you ever need a fresh cut, Dani is happy to help.

-Manuela, Grade 11



AD

Join the Mindfulness CCP!

G11 and 12 students who wish to explore mindfulness deeper are invited to join the Deep Mindfulness CCP that meets every Tuesday after school in the mindfulness center. We always begin with rest and relaxation, as we know how busy the school day is. There will also be opportunities for weekend retreats at beautiful off campus locations later in the year for a select group of interested students.

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

BALANCE

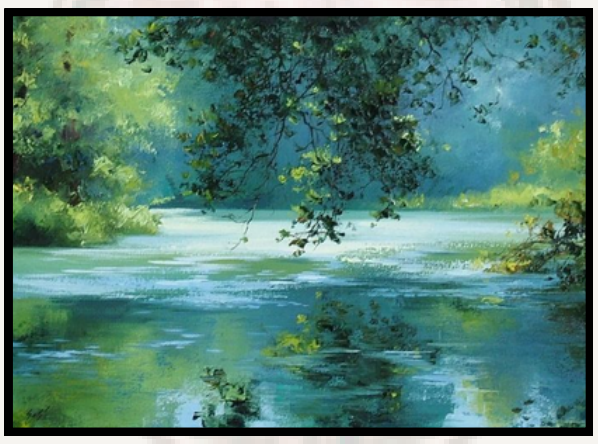
Do something silly once a day to remind yourself not to take life too seriously and be aware of how quickly your own judgement seeps in like walking backwards to class, or singing your favourite song with your Homeroom teacher.





Find creative ways to be in your study flow: Use tools like FocusFlight to have fun with being in the zone, and Screenzen or similar applications to limit your scroll time.

It's okay to take 2-5 minute pauses between classes : Take a moment to just be with yourself if that is needed for you to slow down from rushing to and from classes like washing your hands slowly.





Try being calm in the chaos: when in a really noisy place for example the canteen, notice all the noises, the textures, the sound overlaps, and your own frustration that might arise from the overstimulation. This is to understand that mindfulness doesn't mean escaping from stress, but it's to take control of how you choose to respond.

(From Nara + The Wellbeing Committee)

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

PROJECT WEEK

Plum Village

Marceline

The project week at Plum Village has been a turning point, shaping my relationship towards mindfulness.

From mindful walking every morning, mindful eating, sleeping, mandarin peeling, game playing, and many others, I got to discover mindfulness in so many different shapes. It was my first time being in a Buddhist monastery surrounded by their culture, but still, though as much as their practices were special and strange to me, they were also interestingly familiar and similar to some practices that I encountered in my own religion. It will really be false if I say that it has been the perfect week, because at some point the reality was uncomfortable but I am keeping my mind grateful for the caring people, the sweet smiles and the sillence this place helped me to embrace. My experience there allowed me to approach mindfulness differently, because for the first time since I was in Thailand, it made somehow, some sense. The monks usually will take time to explain concretely what the purpose of these practices was, and how to take the best advantage of them. At the end of the project week, I came back to campus with a new perspective and much less bothered by the word “mindfulness”



Sonam

Plum Village was the site I went to for project week last year. Going there was a decision I made, I thought that perhaps a mindfulness centre would be “chill” and I could get some much-needed downtime after a hectic week of the grade 11 exams. Little did I know what I was in for; it was only after I was confirmed to go that I realized I had just signed up for a week of becoming vegan and waking up at 5 in the morning to meditate, great fun. I tried to look at things through a brighter lens because I believed a different experience would be interesting. This was the first time anyone had gone there for project week, so I tried not to develop any biased ideas based on others' opinions. “Seek and ye shall find.” My time there was nothing short of unique. I do not fancy mindfulness, but took this opportunity to be more open-minded and try to grasp its essence. Some of the practices they had us do were strange, like mindful singing and eating. At times, it made me question whether so much mindfulness was really necessary, but it also reminded me of the importance of one thing: acceptance. I was amazed by the monks there who chose to live a life that I cannot begin to comprehend; their devotion to what they believed in was as inspiring as it was frightening. There were trials and tribulations our group faced, but without the obstacles we were put through, I wouldn't have gotten to understand them better as individuals. And I realized things tend to change when your perspective on them changes.

Although there were many lows, I won’t say that there were no highs. I don’t regret my decision because I value what I learnt from it.

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

The Unexpected Game of Mindfulness

For me, mindfulness began not as a formal practice, but as an afterschool ritual in the south suburbs of Chicago. I can picture it vividly: 4:47 PM on a cold Tuesday evening in late autumn. Homework done, I'm alone on the driveway. The sharp air had already made my hands numb, and I could barely feel the ball as I held it at the free-throw line, looking up at an imaginary scoreboard, the Bulls are losing: 64-65. Ten seconds left.

It's up to me. I dribble left, then I switch hands with a crossover, leaving my imaginary defender behind. I pull up for the jumpshot: three, two, one! SWISH! Nothing but net! The imaginary announcer screams through the microphone headset—"Bulls Win! Bulls Win!"—accompanied by the sound of total, complete pandamonium. The crowd goes wild! Looking back, was this a rudimentary form of visualization and mindfulness? Absolutely.

I now realize I've been practicing mindfulness my entire life through sports, even before I knew the word: coaches insisted I take a deep breath before a little league pitch; football coaches had us visualize plays while stretching; basketball emphasized breathing techniques for free throws; and in high school archery, focusing on my breath was key to hitting the bullseye—all aspects of mindfulness that were simply called fundamentals back then.

I first learned of mindfulness in the 1990s when Chicago Bulls head coach Phil Jackson introduced the practice to superstars like Michael Jordan to help manage the pressures of physical exhaustion, constant travel, and celebrity status during the peak of their dynasty. Today, many other elite athletes, including LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Novak Djokovic, Serena Williams, Tom Brady, and Derek Jeter, incorporate mindfulness to gain a competitive edge; for instance, Stephen Curry uses it to control his breathing and reduce his heart rate during games, seemingly enhancing his endurance.

Kru Ron

Coaching mindfulness: A strategic approach

My approach to coaching mindfulness must be carefully crafted, as many adolescents' maturity leads to skepticism or reluctance, often missing the connection to fast-paced sport and holding the misconception that it requires dim lights and soothing sounds. To overcome this, I focus on two core, practical areas: breathing and visualization.

During practices, we emphasize breathing during natural game breaks—timeouts, dead-ball situations, and free throws—to help players slow down and focus. For instance during practice, for the "the 60 second drill," athletes run until exhausted and then immediately practice shooting free throws, intently focusing on their inhale and exhale to regulate emotions, calm the nervous system, and anchor the mind to the present moment under intense pressure.

In addition to breathing, pre-game visualization is a significant part of the team's practices, where Manta basketball players mentally rehearse successful performance scenarios (like outrebounding opponents or finishing layups) to build confidence and create a clear mental blueprint for success by feeling the emotions and sensations of achieving their goals.

I often compare mindfulness in basketball to using a calculator for a math exam. You won't use it for every problem, and it won't solve a lack of fundamentals or skill. However, when used strategically, the practice of mindfulness—like a calculator—allows the individual to be more efficient, less stressed, and ultimately, have a higher probability of success.

THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 10

Designed by Stella, G10

COLOR AND RELAX!



Check out these playlists!

Thank you to:
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