The Journey Towards Mindfulness

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What is mindfulness? According to Merriam Webster, mindfulness is defined as “the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis” (“Mindfulness”). In Richard Slimbach's *Becoming World Wise*, he clearly details five types of mindfulness for travelers and the actions necessary to achieve mindfulness. While some types of mindfulness described seem to parallel one another, others have a more difficult issue with compatibility. Other reliable sources enable further clarification and promote this idea of becoming culturally mindful while exploring foreign societies. The idea of “world culture” and the true unity of the world is constantly debated for its accuracy for all aspects of mindfulness. While *Becoming World Wise* stimulates the connection of cultural mindfulness and social mindfulness, there is a greater estrangement when considering spiritual mindfulness.

According to Slimbach's *Becoming World Wise*, culture refers to the languages spoken, foods eaten, and clothes worn in a respective place. More prevalent than ever, people are travelling around the world, so it is necessary to honor the diversity offered by each culture. The ability to become informed of these aspects of a society is more readily available because of the internet and social media. However, reading about a culture is not enough to truly develop mindfulness. “Educational travel…often facilitates the free exchange of ideas, allowing each party to become an access point to a more cosmopolitan identity and a more astute cultural perspective” (Slimbach 85). This type of travel provides firsthand experience on a new personal discovery from a different part of the world. Through immersion of oneself into the daily life of a new culture, the traveler has the unique opportunity to understand what happens "behind the scenes" of what the travel brochures boast about a particular area (Slimbach 86). Cultural mindfulness is developed when the traveler is able to embrace the wonders of a new society.

Social mindfulness involves being open to a mutual learning – both on the traveler’s end, and the native’s. When an appreciation of different traditions occurs, it is easier to form “rare cross-cultural bonds and alliances” that bring out the best in both societies (Slimbach 87). Slimbach advises to learn about the heritage and history of the society before travelling to a foreign land, but to also leave any preconceived notions at the airport. The stereotypes of what is thought to happen in a country and by its people can only inhibit the traveler's full cultural learning and understanding. Thru respect of the society, the traveler must be cautioned to learn from rather than change the society (Slimbach 88). It's important to “Show respect for their culture and language. They may be in culture shock and grieving over the ‘loss’ of their culture or at least the fear of losing their cultural identity” (“Ten Steps”). When the traveler recognizes the fact that they are considered an outsider, they will realize that “the view from the outside can offer you an entire different perspective – on people, their traditions, their history, and their relationship to place” (Westerman). Social mindfulness is achieved when mutual respect is given to the cultural learning opportunity.

Cultural intelligence and social mindfulness agree harmoniously in developing a united world culture. According to Slimbach, both of these categories of mindfulness suggest that the traveler fully explore the history, politics, and customs of a desired area to understand and respect the norms of the society. Additionally, both categories demand that travelers strive for humility and acknowledge that they are considered privileged by many countries they will visit. As the foreigner, the visitors must be watchful of their own actions and demeanor to not appear arrogant or demanding of less developed countries (Slimbach 86). To show respect for the new country, the traveler must be a positive, polite representative of his home country. A seemingly innocent comment or gesture could be considered egotistical or demeaning to the host country. For example, "One traveler’s peace sign is another local's hand gesture for 'f--K you'" (“50 Foreign Faux Pas”). In order to rise above these cultural variables, “Don't allow cultural differences (preferences) to become the basis for criticism and judgments. Differences are neither good nor bad. What [is done] with them is the key” (“Ten Steps”). The best way to develop cultural and social mindfulness is to embrace the diversity in one's own country and community. Read current events stories about different religions, nationalities, or cultures. Attend cultural fairs and celebrations. Investigate cultural clubs and organizations and visit their centers. Invite people of different cultures to participate in local events. The more open people can be with the diversity in their daily lives, the more easily they will develop cultural and social mindfulness for the united world culture.

 While becoming spiritually mindful is important to creating a united world culture, it is difficult to syncopate with the other types of mindfulness discussed in Slimbach’s *Becoming World Wise*. In many developing countries, religion and ethnic elements combine to form the culture. This combination influences attitudes towards values, family, community, politics, and the environment. When visiting a new culture, the tourist must be open to the pervasive nature of religion and “the sacred” in this new culture; however, it will most likely be very different from their own. Research can be done to understand the religious values of a family and community, but radical factions develop that make it difficult to understand the ever-changing aspects of that religion (Slimbach 93). Spiritual rites and rituals are often conflicting with the traveler's values and upbringing. While information on the food and dress customs of a country are readily available to research, the social dynamics and security measures are ever-changing. Mindful travelers may be determined to be respectful of a country's values, but the norms of the community may be too different to accept. Patriarchal societies where women are demeaned or enslaved will be difficult to respect. Suicide bombers who act in the name of a religious deity have changed the world culture and its sense of security. Spiritual mindfulness is difficult to achieve because the values of the family and community are so deeply rooted in the traveler. While economic and language differences can be easily understood, the traveler's respect for humanity and the sanctity of life is not readily changed. According to The Journal of Tourism, Hospitality, & Culinary Arts, "wars, conflicts, crises, and terrorism" can result from religious and political divisions in a community (Mohamed). As these divisions widen and the differences multiply, spiritual mindfulness will be even more difficult to attain.

 As the world seemingly becomes smaller through the internet, social media, and educational travel, it is the duty of the traveler to enhance and develop the world culture. Through social and cultural mindfulness, travelers learn and embrace the newness in foreign societies while being a positive representative of their home nations. When stereotypes of the new nation are dismissed and feelings of Western superiority are relinquished, the traveler is able to gain a greater respect and appreciation for the outside world. Far more challenging is the development of spiritual mindfulness in countries that don't embrace the traditional Judeo-Christian values of the West. While research may deepen a traveler's basic understanding of an area, religious wars or devaluation of women are examples of spiritual and community values that are difficult, if not impossible, to understand and accept. Mutual respect and cultural understanding are key to uniting the world. However, spiritual rituals and community values hinder the development of a completely mindful world traveler.

Works Cited

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