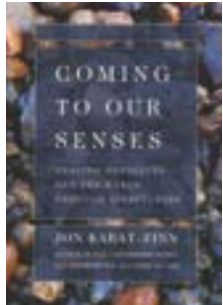


Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness

BY JON KABAT-ZINN

Hyperion, 2005, 631 pages



THE LATEST WORK from best-selling author Jon Kabat-Zinn reiterates and expands upon the themes of his earlier books: that Buddhist-based meditation and mindfulness techniques can relieve stress and stimulate

healing. By mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn means “our capacity for awareness and self-knowing”—it’s the practice of paying closer attention not only to the world around us, but to the workings of our own minds and bodies. A molecular biologist and professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Kabat-Zinn has spent most of his career exploring the mind/body frontier via his groundbreaking Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness, both housed at the medical school.

Kabat-Zinn writes his book in bite-sized chapters that are grouped into separate parts. While there is a section on the nuts and bolts of different meditation styles, he focuses most of the book on the senses. Kabat-Zinn is mainly concerned with how we can train ourselves to become more aware of our sensory experiences, and he emphasizes the interrelationship between how we sense our internal emotions and how we experience the external world. He sees mindfulness as a way of understanding ourselves better so that we may also better understand those different from us; to him, then, mindfulness is a means to transforming the world from the inside out. His mini-essays serve to demystify mindfulness for readers and identify the benefits it can bring them.

Kabat-Zinn also mixes in science, both in describing neurological processes that occur during meditation and in presenting controlled studies of meditation practices. In one of his studies, for instance, patients with psoriasis who listened to a customized meditation tape while undergoing ultraviolet-light therapy healed four times faster than those who didn’t listen to the tape. In another experiment, in collaboration with University of Wisconsin, Madison, psychologist Richard Davidson, biotechnology workers who went

through Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program registered more activity in the portion of the brain devoted to positive emotions than nonmeditating workers. Kabat-Zinn also reports on Davidson’s prior research on Tibetan lamas, which has shown uncommonly high activity in the positive-emotion areas of their brains.

In a nod to the jittery post-September 11 world, Kabat-Zinn widens his lens to include an entire section on politics. Rather than a good-versus-evil political dichotomy, he suggests “a less dualistic way of seeing” our adversaries. In this alternate universe, he writes, “we might find ways ... to act wisely and firmly to move things in a direction of healing. ... In a word, a politics of wisdom and compassion, nurtured through mindfulness and lovingkindness.” Right now, that doesn’t seem possible—but then, the field of integrative medicine didn’t seem possible 30 years ago, either.

At its best, Kabat-Zinn’s writing style is like a mindfulness tape in print, bringing the reader to a meditative state of awareness through its calm reiteration of key points. All too often, though, a single sentence takes up a lengthy paragraph, making the 631-page book about a third longer than it needs to be.

Nevertheless, the language is always accessible and never condescending to the professional and lay reader alike. In *Coming to Our Senses*, Kabat-Zinn fans will find more paths to mindfulness, and newcomers will find a gentle, knowledgeable guide.

—Pat Soberanis

The Hand of Compassion: Portraits of Moral Choice During the Holocaust

BY KRISTEN RENWICK MONROE

Princeton University Press, 2004, 392 pages



THE HAND OF COMPASSION is the latest of several books to use the Holocaust as a basis for studying altruism and compassion. Strange as this may seem, Nazi Germany provides researchers with

a perverse control group, where evil and apathy were the norm. People who could demonstrate compassion even in the midst of such pervasive cruelty must truly possess an altruistic personality, surmises Hand

of Compassion author Kristen Renwick Monroe, and so understanding their psychology could help shed light on “the impetus behind moral action” in general.

Building on her conclusions from a previous book, *The Heart of Altruism*, Monroe argues that altruism results from a person’s particular way of seeing the world, which she calls “the altruistic perspective.” To provide as clear a window as possible into that worldview, Monroe has focused her new book on just five individuals who rescued others during the Holocaust, and she has presented the transcripts of her interviews with them in nearly unedited form. Rather than seeking a definitive answer as to what made these people commit such exceptionally compassionate acts, Monroe wants to provide as full an account of her subjects’ life stories as possible—complete with contradictions, tangents, and digressions—and allow readers to draw their own conclusions, then compare these conclusions with her own analysis.

There is something exceptionally powerful and edifying about reading these heroic individuals’ stories in their own, unedited words. But the interviewees have a tendency to interrupt themselves, and all the breaks in narrative flow can try the reader’s patience. With a little more editing, Monroe might have preserved the book’s sense of intimacy while also making the stories more consistently readable and engaging.

Ultimately, though, because such full accounts help the reader see the world through the eyes of Monroe’s subjects, the format helps support the author’s main point. For the rescuers, their decisions to help others seem not to have been decisions at all. Instead, their actions appear to have been an outgrowth of their strong moral identities—how they saw themselves and their relationships to other people, strangers and acquaintances alike. “It was not a decision,” said one of the interviewees, Otto Springer. “It was just part of my character. Something I felt.”

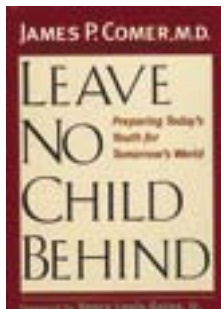
Monroe argues persuasively that altruists distinguish themselves by their ability to see all people as human beings no different from themselves, and she provides a compelling glimpse into the “altruistic perspective.” Nonetheless, her book leaves readers questioning why so few people maintained the altruistic perspective during the Holocaust, and wondering how we can apply her insights toward raising more altruists in the future.

—Jason Marsh

Leave No Child Behind

BY JAMES COMER

Yale University Press, 2004, 352 pages



TEACHERS, PARENTS, and politicians regularly bemoan the quality of America's public school system. The news is full of stories of illiterate high school graduates, weapons and drugs

on campuses, and "impossible children" who are incapable of being taught. In early 2002, the Bush Administration launched its attempt to reverse these trends with the No Child Left Behind Act. Before the act even became law, it was widely criticized for, among other things, relying heavily on standardized tests to determine whether a school or school district receives a carrot or a stick. More than three years later, these criticisms have only intensified.

James Comer crystallizes many of the law's flaws in his recent book, *Leave No Child Behind*. For one, he says, increased reliance on testing means more class time must be spent teaching to tests instead of helping kids develop general skills they'll need to be productive adults. Comer calls this the "brains on a stick" teaching method, since it only teaches facts to children and "ignores their feelings, relationship needs and capacities, dreams, and aspirations." But Comer's book goes much further than restating the problems with No Child Left Behind: He presents a viable alternative.

Over the past 37 years, Comer, a child psychiatrist at Yale University's School of Medicine, has been developing what he calls the School Development Program (SDP), and what many educators and policymakers call the "Comer Program." A pioneering program in the growing educational movement of social and emotional learning, the SDP starts from the principle that building strong relationships is the only way to help children become successful in life as well as in school. To Comer, there are no "impossible children." Instead, he believes that given the right conditions in schools, all children can reach high levels of academic achievement.

Leave No Child Behind is Comer's overview of his program's development and promise. After tracing his own childhood

in working-class East Chicago, Indiana, he describes the SDP's start in two New Haven elementary schools in 1968 and lays out its intricate framework. The program is centered around three teams, one made up of teachers, parents, administrators, mental and physical health staff, and nonprofessional staff; one solely of parents; and another team comprised of support professionals such as social workers, psychologists, and nurses. The teams focus their diverse perspectives on the unified goal of cultivating a positive, responsive, and democratic school community.

The program seems complex on paper, but its results speak clearly. It now exists in elementary, middle, and high schools in 20 states, from Colorado to Florida, and has shown dramatic improvements in many schools, often in as few as five years. Test scores rise dramatically, but even more importantly, students are more focused, engaged, and better behaved.

Though occasionally hampered by awkward and jargon-laden prose, Comer handily makes the case that his School Development Program holds worlds of potential for students of all races and classes. As the backlash against No Child Left Behind mounts, his is a welcome voice urging cooperation and exploration. And most importantly, he offers a plan with real promise to improve the lives of children well beyond their time in the classroom.

—Matthew Wheeland

The Compassionate Classroom: Lessons That Nurture Wisdom and Empathy

BY JANE DALTON AND LYN FAIRCHILD

Zephyr Press, 2004, 166 pages



VETERAN TEACHERS Jane Dalton and Lyn Fairchild's greatest concern in the classroom is not with raising their students' test scores. It is with raising consciousness. Specifically, Dalton and Fairchild are interested in encourag-

ing students to get to know and appreciate themselves, their community, and the world around them. Dalton and Fairchild have named this type of consciousness "spiritual literacy," and though it is lacking

in modern society, they argue, it can be cultivated in the classroom. With *The Compassionate Classroom: Lessons That Nurture Wisdom and Empathy*, they want to help teachers do just that. To that end, they've produced a well-organized book rich with wisdom, creativity, and concrete lesson plans.

The 40 lesson plans in the book each center on a different theme, such as wonderment, mindfulness, or grace. In relating the importance of each theme to classroom life, the authors provide detailed descriptions of how that theme has been considered by religious and secular philosophies, and outline in-class projects for making these philosophies come alive in the classroom.

For example, to foster mindfulness, Dalton and Fairchild offer a simulation where students are given prisoner rations of bread and read a passage from a novel describing prisoner life, thereby encouraging them to appreciate the food and freedoms they have in their own lives. In the chapter on creativity, the authors suggest asking students to draw with their non-dominant hand, thus dissolving self-consciousness and promoting enjoyment of the artistic process.

It is obvious that the authors have drawn largely upon their own experiences. This is most evident in the anecdotes that appear in every chapter, illustrating powerful moments of student inspiration, tough decision-making, and revelations by teachers and students alike. In the chapter on grace, Fairchild describes an encounter with one of her students, whom she catches stealing cookies from the cafeteria. Although she is shocked, she decides to let the child go free when she realizes that he has learned his lesson by simply being caught in the act. In this way, Fairchild stresses her belief that it is most important to help children grow from their mistakes by granting second chances.

The authors close each chapter with a question designed to encourage readers to think about ways they could add a personal touch to the lessons. More than anything else, the authors want to make the classroom a more human, caring place. If teachers are to awaken compassion and creativity in their students, it helps to have veterans like Dalton and Fairchild nurturing the compassion and creativity of teachers.

—Lauren Shapiro