

Guiding the Girls Back Home

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“Say to yourself, ‘May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be peaceful. . . .’” The words of the Buddha are spoken by twelve-year-old Shyante. We are lying on the floor of the conference room at the Edgewood Center for Families and Children in San Francisco, where I have been offering a weekly meditation and yoga class to a small group of girls for the past five years. On this day, the students are taking turns teaching a portion of the class. Shyante specifically requested to teach relaxation and the “wishes for well-being” that we share. This was a surprise to me because Shyante’s history of physical and sexual abuse made it impossible for her to lie still during our relaxation; for several months she had to leave the room until the closing circle. She was now reclaiming her place in the class and demonstrating the impact these simple wishes had on her.

Edgewood is a residential mental health treatment center. The children who live here have mostly grown up in foster care. They were removed from their homes at an early age due to abuse, neglect or both. Some had addicted parents and received drugs while in utero. The children at Edgewood have often experienced severe body trauma. Most have been physically abused and many were sexually abused. As a result they are defended, sometimes very disconnected from their bodies, and prone to dissociation. All of these children have mental health diagnoses, and Edgewood is a safe and loving home for them.

From the beginning I experienced how the girls’ traumas caused them to disconnect. One day Cathy’s medication made her dizzy and she fell down and broke her wrist. She returned from the hospital with a cast and got lots of attention and sympathy. Susan was so jealous that she punched her fist through a wall in hopes of getting her own cast—and the accompanying sympathy. Another time, as I arrived for class, I found Alicia in a full-on psychotic fit and being held down by four staff people to keep her from harming herself or anyone else. Myself and the other girls had to step over her body to get into the classroom. Experiences like this are so raw and potent. I sometimes wondered whether I was making a difference in the girls’ lives.

Yet despite the challenges the girls face, they *are* clearly benefiting from learning and practicing mindfulness and conscious body movement. Their confidence and self-esteem have grown, and so has their enthusiasm. Creating a sense of ritual through repeating a regular sequence of activities helps the girls to relax and feel safe. We begin our class with a short meditation—taking turns ringing the chimes and sitting and breathing together. Just counting five mindful breaths has a powerful impact. The girls calm down and focus their attention. Over time the girls have begun to feel their bodies and to share their experiences with me.

One day as we practiced belly breathing, Shyante burst out, “I can’t breathe into my belly. It’s all hard, like a rock!” She was beginning to break down the wall of numbness created by her past abuse. Another time Aleya asked, “Could you please

count longer for the breaths? You're breathing too fast for me." She had become so relaxed that her breathing had slowed significantly. At the end of another class, Monique passed me a note: "Thank you so much for your kindness." When she first arrived at Edgewood, she refused to talk to anyone. Her parents were addicts, and she had learned not to trust, not to open her heart, and not to care. After several months at Edgewood, she began to care again. Jessica was prone to violent outbursts of anger, so her therapist and I taught her walking meditation to calm her down and not act out. She practiced diligently, and after a week of no outbursts, she earned a reward from her therapist for her efforts. What did she request? A trip to the San Francisco Zen Center.

When I was first invited to teach at Edgewood, I looked on it as an experiment. We thought we would try it for a month. The class continued for over five years. The mindfulness we practice—along with simple yoga movements—are tools guiding the girls back home to their bodies.

The names of the girls have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

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