



## DECEMBER SCOPE PRACTICING PREVENTION COLUMN

### Jason A. Laker, Ph.D.

This will be my last monthly Practicing Prevention Column as SCOPE's 2013 Inaugural Visiting Scholar. It has been a true honor and pleasure serving in this capacity. During this past year, I have really enjoyed working to develop this new role with SCOPE and NCHERM Group colleagues, especially Brett Sokolow, Michelle Issadore, and Brian Van Brunt. Brett and I have known each other for over ten years. We met at a conference, then I had the pleasure of hosting him for a training session with a new student peer judicial board that I created in my capacity as Dean of Campus Life at Saint John's University in Minnesota. I met Brian at a NaBITA conference, and Michelle through SCOPE.

As I was preparing to write this last Column, I was reflecting on the many professional transitions that have happened during the last decade—mine, theirs, and those of many other colleagues with whom I've been friends for a long time. I have watched with wonder as Brett and his partners have grown the NCHERM Group, launching several needed and well-received organizations and major initiatives. On my part, after leaving Saint John's I moved to Canada to take up the Chief Student Affairs Officer role at Queen's University, along with a faculty position in Gender Studies. Then I moved here to California, when a departing President of San José State University hired me to serve as Vice President for Student Affairs. There have been two more University Presidents here since then and a few years ago, I left the administrative role and became a full-time Professor in Counselor Education. Only a year later, I was elected to serve as Department Chair. I could never have predicted the twists, turns and various surprises that have happened in this time.

So it seems apt that the last month of 2013, and of my role as the first SCOPE Visiting Scholar, for my topic to be focused on transitions. I'm sure that many or most readers have stories about unexpected detours, opportunities, disappointments or even calamities have taken place in their professional lives over the last number of years. This is aside from countless others in our personal lives. If you have been reading these monthly Columns, then you know that I have been very focused on mindfulness practices for quite some time. This interest has become a strong set of commitments guiding my professional and personal life. Indeed, I no longer make a distinction between personal and professional per se, because I see work as a form of personal expression. We in education have a great privilege in this regard. To be sure, there are many strains on our morale or professional stability at times. But even on our most unpleasant days, we are able to do worthy work with our students and each other, enabling people in big and small ways to develop and to lead more purposeful lives. We work with students at a time of significant transition, and we also undergo transitions of greater or lesser consequence depending on the details.

As I write this article, our university is embroiled in some very serious conflicts associated with issues of identity, especially (though not exclusively) relating to race. Even before these conflicts came to light here on campus and in national media, our University Senate had voted overwhelmingly to call on the system Chancellor to review the governance of the current administration. So, this is also a period of institutional transition. It remains to be seen whether these will move to a series of restorative solutions or an escalation into further conflicts and/or more leadership changes. I mention these here because having worked at six universities, I have seen such complicated, difficult and stressful situations before. They are as much a part of the landscape of education as the more celebrative and redemptive stories are. This is not to diminish the hurtful and challenging experiences of all concerned. Rather, it is a reminder that we are in the transition business, on every level from intimate personal journeys to changing society writ large.

So, as Wellness and Prevention Educators, it behooves us to think of transitions as we might think of waves in the oceans—as business conditions, rather than problems to solve. Let me clarify, I appreciate the importance of practical advice, checklists and program models, but I find that during times of great stress and complexity,

actionable ways forward arise from carving out time for reflection whether privately or through deliberation with trusted friends, family or colleagues.

Drawing from a diversity of mindfulness teachings and traditions, we can come to recognize that transitions imply movement from one situation to another. Isn't it true that it is in struggle that we find solidarity? I have seen some incredibly beautiful acts of camaraderie and kindness here during this tough time, as I have at other places and times. Students have shown amazing initiative in the form of marches, messages and demands. Colleagues have rolled up their sleeves and provided thoughtful conversation space at meetings and in hallways and courtyards. I remarked ironically (with intentional humor) at a meeting of fellow Department Chairs that I could think of no finer people with whom to be miserable.

We can help our students by sitting in the murky metaphorical places of transition with them. Our commitment to being present with them (without electronic devices and other distractions) offers a calming and gracious space for finding meaning and perhaps even answers. As we are a group of practitioners, I confess that I have tried to offer pragmatic tips in this series, but I keep coming back to the mindfulness concepts. I came to this problem honestly. The fact is that I have read a lot of nice professional articles over the years on programs and practices that worked very well in the places and situations of the writers. They invariably required refinements or reworks in order for me to use them in my own work. I realize now that it was through taking time to reflect and let the ingredients knock around in my mind or be discussed with others that I was able to reconstitute the advice into action plans.

Since this is my last article, I am going to make one last pitch for my belief that thinking IS acting. We endure so much pressure to articulate plans with so-called evidence and data. Of course I fill out matrices and submit reports, but I mischievously think of them as ritual objects, recognizing that the most important work we do will never appear in them. That is not a problem to solve, but rather a business condition. As I conclude this wonderful year as the SCOPE Visiting Scholar, I would like to thank all of you. I would also like to invite you to join me in a quiet conspiracy to take walks, think, sit silently with people who are upset or even happy, to smile knowingly at conflict and to honor the resilience it is hiding, released to us only through reflection.

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For more information about Dr. Laker and his role as Visiting Scholar with SCOPE, visit <http://wearescope.org/resources/visiting-scholar/>

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