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Educating the Mindful Citizen: SUNY Trustee Joseph Belluck '94 Advocates for Mindfulness' Place in University Curriculums

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Is your mind full or mindful?

Educating the mindful citizen

SUNY Trustee Joseph Belluck ’94 advocates for mindfulness’ place in university curriculums

Joseph W. Belluck ’94 has studied contemplative practices and knows their benefits firsthand. Now, as a State University of New York trustee, he’s lobbying educators to weave the element of mindfulness into their curriculums. The goal is to shore up a beleaguered ideal of university life – the value of a liberal arts education in creating thoughtful, engaged citizens.

Belluck is a founding partner of Belluck & Fox, a nationally recognized law firm with asbestos and mesothelioma cases, located in New York City. Belluck has spent his entire legal career representing injured consumers and workers. Prior to founding the firm, he served as a judicial law clerk for Justice Lloyd Doggett of the Texas Supreme Court and as a staff attorney and consumer lobbyist for Public Citizen in Washington, D.C.

For more photos and a video, visit: www.law.buffalo.edu/forum/extra
Belluck brought that message, in an event titled “Making the Mindful Citizen,” to the Law School in April. Addressing a Cellino & Barnes Conference Center jam-packed with students, faculty and staff members, he first spoke in personal terms of how the breathing and meditation exercises he first learned as an undergraduate at Binghamton University have sustained him in a successful legal career.

“In my law practice, I deal with people who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness,” said Belluck, whose New York City firm, Belluck & Fox, focuses on asbestos and mesothelioma cases. “They’re mostly of a particular generation, and they’re not the most emotive folks in the world. They tend not to like to communicate. As their lawyer, we often become the person who’s closest to them and the person they talk to about what is going to happen to them.”

Mindful legal practice, he said, means doing what Dale Carnegie advised 80 years ago in his book How to Win Friends and Influence People. “Take a genuine and sincere interest in other people, and focus on them.”

“That is a very important skill for a lawyer,” Belluck said, “and it’s often the most valuable first step in the lawyer-client relationship. Having compassion for what people are going through, whether it’s your clients or your adversary counsel, is also a very important skill.”

No less important, he said, is the value of contemplative practice as self-care, to stay healthy and avoid burnout. “We help people deal with suffering on many different levels,” he said. “All of these practices help lawyers deal with helping other people with their suffering. I deal with people who are dying, all the time. Having these ways to understand that everybody goes through suffering—that’s very important to regulate your own emotional well-being.”

Citing clinical research on the mental benefits of meditation and similar practices, Belluck pointed to the salutary effects of stress reduction, improved focus and cognitive skills, even a higher level of compassion for other people. But, he said, it would be a mistake to understand these practices as simply a means to a professional edge. “The goal of mindfulness is not only to focus your attention in a way that allows you to have more self-awareness, but also in a way that allows you to build connections to other people,” he said. “You are transforming yourself in some ways, but you are also transforming communities.”

Hence his advocacy for the place of mindfulness in the university system, including in professional schools like law schools. By incorporating contemplative practice into curriculums, he said, universities can better prepare students to be more effective as they begin their careers. “I do think that people who really spend time with this end up being more likely to live with true compassion,” he said.

And that in turn, he said, produces rippling effects for society as a whole, including equipping citizens of New York and the nation with the tools to become more engaged and communitarian.

“As a lawyer,” Belluck said, “I often say to my clients and prospective clients that being involved in litigation stinks. It’s just not a good process for anybody, whether you’re the plaintiff or the defendant. But even though it’s an adversarial system and you’re presenting two sides of an argument or two applications of the law to a particular set of facts, at the end of the day people have to walk away thinking the process worked for them. These contemplative practices can often help in orienting future lawyers to understand that.

“Law schools are famous for using the Socratic method, but Socrates also said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ That means you need to take time to examine and reflect. My personal challenge to law schools is to broaden your view of the Socratic method, to allow into your teaching a period of time where you allow people to examine themselves through contemplative practice.”

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– Joseph W. Belluck ’94

Better lawyers, better lives

Attention must be paid. And in several initiatives that are becoming part of the fabric of the Law School, mindfulness is helping students and faculty to focus.

“Mindfulness is about developing the capacity to pay attention to exactly what is going on now, to the person in front of you or the situation around you, without being distracted by plans for the future or worries about the past,” says Professor Stephanie L. Phillips, who has spearheaded these initiatives.

That close, focused attention is a valuable skill for lawyers. And discussion and experience of mindfulness practices, such as breathing meditation, enables broader discussion of lawyers’ relationships with clients and colleagues, and their place in the wider society.

Since 2006 the school has offered second- and third-year students an elective seminar called Mindfulness and Professional Identity. Registration is capped at 18 students, and the course is so popular that three sections are now offered, taught by Phillips, Professor Athena Mutua and adjunct Professor Elaine Hammond. Students discuss issues of professional ethics, identity and the lawyer’s role, and in class and at home practice mindfulness techniques and reflect on that experience.

Phillips emphasizes that there’s plenty of empirical evidence to show that mindfulness improves the skills that lawyers need. The central act of meditation, for example—returning one’s mind again and again to a centering point after it wanders away—has been shown to measurably improve focus and concentration.

“Mindfulness practices are tools that will make you a better lawyer,” Phillips says. “We also emphasize the health benefits, because the stress level on lawyers and law students is incredible.”

As an outgrowth of the seminar, and as a gift to stressed law students, Phillips also offers drop-in meditation once or twice a week. The Law School has also become part of a wider movement on mindfulness and the law. The Western New York Contemplative Faculty/Staff Working Group comprises faculty at UB, Buffalo State College and Niagara University; They share ideas about how to infuse contemplative techniques into their teaching in disciplines as varied as law, nursing, counseling, psychology, social work and English. The group is hoping to sponsor a conference next year.