

## Work as a Spiritual Practice

# La route longue et sinueuse qui m'a conduit aux Programmes en soins holistique de McGill

Patricia Lynn Dobkin

Volume 10, Number 2, 2023

Transformations in Healthcare

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101708ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v10i2.377>

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Publisher(s)

McGill University Library

ISSN

2291-918X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Dobkin, P. (2023). Work as a Spiritual Practice. *The International Journal of Whole Person Care*, 10(2), 13–16. <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v10i2.377>

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## WORK AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

**Patricia Lynn Dobkin**

Department of Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Montreal, Quebec, Canada  
patricia.dobkin@mcgill.ca

**KEYWORDS:** Mindfulness, Spirituality, Whole Person Care

**T**he theme of this volume, personal transformation, invites me to reflect on the purpose of my work. After 32 years of thriving in academia it is timely for me to look in the rear-view mirror – now that I am retired. I will share seeds planted and guiding stars that helped me change from an ambitious clinician-researcher determined to obtain tenure in a respected, albeit rather conservative, medical school to a person who dreamed of integrating mindfulness practices into clinical practice and medical education.

The seeds sown in my youth were many. As an avid reader, I was influenced by philosophers and poets who opened my mind to the possibility of finding a Path within oneself and a Way to live it authentically. Dr. Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist-psychologist intrigued me with his book *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. His notions of collective unconscious, archetypes, dreams, and symbols of transformation invited me to seek an inner life. Emily Dickinson modeled how a woman could live life her own unconventional way. During my search for a place where I belonged in this world Krishnamurti's wisdom guided me. He wrote, "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." This idea validated messages I was absorbing at the time (1970's) from the women's and civil rights movements, the motto "Make love not war!" and the Beatles messages via songs (e.g., *Let It Be*; *The Long and Winding Road*). Ram Dass' book *Be Here Now* \* propelled me to venture to India where I discovered Auroville – an UNESCO-recognized international city. There the Oxford-educated revolutionary mystic Sri Aurobindo and his collaborator, *la*

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\*What impressed me while reading this book at 18 years old was how it emphasized self-discovery, confronting societal conventions (i.e., examining illusions), and Dass' description of the Buddhist Eight-Fold Path. Recently I reread it, 50 years later and was surprised to see how its Truth still resonates with me.

*Mère*, encouraged people like me (young and idealistic) to bring consciousness into everyday life. Satprem's book *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventures of Consciousness* called us to, "find the perfect harmony of East and West, of inner freedom and outer mastery." Spiritual seeds were planted; they would sprout and blossom only later when conditions in my life were ripe. Alas, I needed to return to the West and find out how to actualize what I had been exposed to.

After what my father called "my sabbatical" I returned to university to eventually earn a doctorate in Clinical Psychology with a speciality in Mind-Body Medicine. The choice of profession fit my desire to understand how people could discover themselves and reach their full potential. It was also a continuation of what I experienced in my travels. Yet, the demands of school and my fear of failure (which would cast me adrift in a society where I did not fit in) led to a period that obscured the Way of life promoted by Ram Dass and Sri Aurobindo. It was as if I could no longer see the stars guiding me even though they were there in the dark. I felt compelled to succeed in the conventional sense and needed to resolve inner conflicts before I could revisit my spiritual aspirations.

If I had to put my finger on what enabled me to return to who I was when I traveled the globe for five years it would be when I mail-ordered meditation audiotapes and books such as, *The Varieties of Meditation Experiences* by Dr. Goldman, who had studied in India in the same ashram as Ram Dass. I had been fascinated by the early empirical studies showing yogis controlling body reactions (e.g., blood pressure, temperature) in ways not yet understood by Western scientists. Dr. Goldman, along with the Harvard cardiologist, Dr. Benson, explained how this could be done in his classic book, *The Relaxation Response*. Mind-body links were being observed as the technological means for measuring them emerged. I trained in a pain clinic that employed hypnosis and wondered about the similarities and differences between these "mind tools." As I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of the psyche for patients with chronic pain and illness, I aspired to not only treat patients but also teach physicians the importance of psychosocial factors for patient outcomes. If relief of suffering was our mutual goal, then our work could be a spiritual practice – i.e., acts of compassion. Many physicians throughout history have exemplified this ideal (e.g., Drs. Albert Schweitzer, Paul Farmer).

My professional trajectory took a turn when a proposal written by Dr. Mount about Whole Person Care landed on my desk. I thought that my interest in patients with chronic illness could complement their focus on palliative medicine. I had an epiphany: this emerging group of like-hearted colleagues could provide the soil where mindfulness work could be cultivated. It became the ground for the Aurovillian seeds to sprout. After Drs. Mount, Hutchinson and I took a road trip to OMEGA (a retreat center in New York) to take Kabat-Zinn and Santorelli's mindfulness course, our journey together began.

I had to practice what I wanted to teach (i.e., mindfulness). Thus, I meditated in Zen centers, continued my training with Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues to become a certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

(MBSR) instructor. I attended Vipassana and Insight Dialogue retreats for years. Gradually, I gained insight into the processes and true purpose underlying meditation. Mindfulness, contrary to the current zeitgeist, is not a technique; it is one of eight steps on what Buddhists call the Noble Path. By teaching MBSR, and later Mindfulness-Based Medical Practice year after year I gained a deeper understanding of how and why this approach to life was beneficial. By conducting research and writing papers on the topic I deepened my own understanding. Being naturally curious, I continued to learn from the Masters (e.g., J. Goldstein, G. Kramer, HH the Dalai Lama) by reading. Their words elucidated my experiences. Vipassana is “insight meditation”; by observing one’s inner experiences (mental and physical, and the links between them) cause and effect (karma) is understood. One sees with clarity universal truths about being human. Over time, I became less anxious, more patient, better able to listen deeply while gaining insight into the causes of suffering. Compassion emerged naturally. Observing patients’ positive outcomes following mindfulness programs elicited sympathetic joy in me. I was passionate about sharing what I was learning. Why? Because living fully in the present moment (Be Here Now) has the power to transform lives. I was able to relax into the work rather than be driven by it. I used my creative energy for the good of others. I was grateful to have come home, at long last, to an inner as well as outer place where I belonged. The confluence of these experiences enabled the Aurovillian seeds to finally bear fruit.

This was an exciting time as we were at the forefront of something yet to be accepted in mainstream medicine. We designed mindfulness programs for patients, physicians, and allied health care professionals. We experimented with different workshop formats (half-day, full-day, weekend) to reach as many clinicians as possible. We published papers, book chapters, and books to share our insights. I taught fourth-year medical students MBSR for several years. This led to the adapted Mindful Medical Practice course that is currently part of the second year of medical students’ curriculum (Drs. Liben and Hutchinson, along with others designed the final course).

After my sabbatical leave in Paris where I taught MBSR to clinicians and patients, I was given a green light to leave the McGill University Health Center Research Institute to devote myself fully to Whole Person Care. I was free to publish commentaries that drew on literature for inspiration (e.g., *The Heart of Healing*). I attended a workshop at Columbia Medical School to learn Narrative Medicine techniques. This enabled me to publish the edited book, *Mindful Medical Practice: Clinical Narratives and Therapeutic Insights*. For eight years I invited authors to share ideas while editing the *International Journal of Whole Person Care*. Employing Narrative Medicine techniques, we published a special volume in January 2021 highlighting clinicians’ harrowing experiences on the front line of COVID-19. Recognizing that most clinicians could not attend eight-week mindfulness programs, I provided a Physician Wellness program sponsored by the Department of Medicine. The MUHC Wellness Task Force was formed during the pandemic to offset the stress caregivers experienced on the front lines. We offered an online workshop entitled the Four Pillars of Wellbeing. Currently we lead Schwartz Rounds that provide a sense of community for physicians and other staff in our hospitals.

Now, as a member of a program for retired McGill professors I will continue to serve the institution that provided me with not only a wonderful career but a sense of purpose. How grateful I am for the journey that led me to McGill Programs in Whole Person Care which fulfilled my aspirations born in an international city (Auroville, India) where one's work was a means to embody spiritual longings. I was able to maintain a sense of belonging while touching others' lives in ways that helped them lead happy healthy lives. This is my definition of work as a spiritual practice. ■

## **Biographical note**

Dr. Patricia Lynn Dobkin has been a family member of McGill University since her undergraduate years. She obtained a PhD in Clinical Psychology in the United States and returned to McGill University as a Post-doctoral Fellow. She taught Mind-Body Medicine and conducted clinical trials of psychosocial interventions for patients with chronic illness as a member of the Division of Clinical Epidemiology, at the McGill University Health Centre Research Institute. As an Associate Professor she joined the McGill Programs in Whole Person Care where she launched numerous mindfulness-based initiatives including programs and workshops for patients with chronic illness and health care professionals. She served as the Editor of the International Journal of Whole Person Care for 8 years. Currently, albeit retired, she is a member of the McGill Department of Medicine Wellness Task Force that provides physicians with initiatives that enable them to thrive in their profession.