



2016

Fika—Mindfulness for the LRW Professor

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Recommended Citation

Thornton, Karen, Fika—Mindfulness for the LRW Professor (2016). Karen D. Thornton, Fika—Mindfulness for the LRW Professor, 24 *Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing* 29 (2016); GWU Law School Public Law Research Paper No. 2018-18; GWU Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-18. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3168744>

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Cite as: Karen D. Thornton, *Fika—Mindfulness for the LRW Professor*, 24 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing 29 (2016).

Fika—Mindfulness for the LRW Professor

By Karen D. Thornton

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This is a love story. The story of two LRW professors who have such a love for teaching and preparing students for practice that they allow their own love of writing to come second. Until they realized their love of food and steady companionship could lead them to a state of greater balance and attentiveness.

A Collegial Bond

I'll never forget my first day on the job at GW Law School. For weeks before I had lost sleep, worrying someone from the dean's office would call to strip me of my dream job, but when I reached campus on that first day, I was wide awake. So alert that when I approached the elevator below the LRW suite, I saw a young woman standing there whose nervous excitement reflected my own. I knew without introduction that she was my new colleague, Iselin Gambert.¹

During that first orientation day, we revealed our shared anxieties and the divergent paths that had led us to join a legal writing faculty that had just doubled in size from two to four. By the end of the day, we found we also shared a Scandinavian heritage, her mother from Norway, mine from Sweden. We told stories of our travels "home," and vowed together to channel our Viking strength into this new adventure.

Later that week, the LRW director was shocked to discover us in my office at 2 p.m., enjoying an afternoon snack. A *fika* to be precise. *Fika* is the Swedish social custom of pausing to enjoy a cup

of coffee and sweet treat with friends or colleagues. One *fikas*—the word is so essential to Swedish tradition as to be both a noun and a verb—not with the hurried energy that Americans "grab coffee," but with the simpler purpose of being connected.² Iselin and I were snacking on homemade oatmeal cookies and sipping coffee brewed in the faculty lounge Keurig machine. Our director called down the hall to our fourth team member—"Look at this!" Her tone was amused, not critical. How could there possibly be time in the day of an LRW professor to pause for reflection and gain connectedness?

As anyone in our profession might guess, our *fika* tradition ran out at the end of that batch of oatmeal cookies. By the third week on the job, we were so overwhelmed and stressed by the task of serving our students, that pausing to breathe, let alone reflect and connect, felt like an indulgence.

The LRW Professor in Search of Stillness and Attentiveness

Last August, five years and two contract renewals later, Iselin and I squeezed a rare lunch date into our final days of lesson planning to make resolutions for the 2014–15 academic year. We reflected on how far we had come since that first day—how many new lawyers we had shaped, LRW conferences we had presented at, and the professional relationships we had fostered there. Without an assigned faculty mentor, we had only each other to challenge for new goals. We

“One *fikas*—the word is so essential to Swedish tradition as to be both a noun and a verb—not with the hurried energy that Americans 'grab coffee,' but with the simpler purpose of being connected.”

² Yael Averbuch, "In Sweden, the Fika Experience," *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/13/sports/soccer/in-sweden-the-fika-experience.html> ("As an American, I had been accustomed to getting coffee to boost my energy during a day packed with activities. ... In Sweden, I've come to relish the art of what is called fika. *Fika*, as a noun, refers to the combination of coffee and usually some sort of sweet snack. But fika, as a verb, is the act of partaking in a Swedish social institution. [In my career as a professional soccer player] every success or momentary failure can wreak havoc on my mind and spirit. I have learned in some ways to thrive on the tumult, but in other ways the upheaval takes a huge toll. The fika experience is a time of stillness amid my roller-coaster ride.")

¹ You may know Iselin from the December 2014 issue of the "LWI Lives" Newsletter, <https://drive.google.com/a/usfca.edu/file/d/0B-qVHm6mC6YoYm50S2Eyd1J4UUE/view?usp=sharing>

“But how, even with our proven discipline and work ethic, could we find time to research and write where we had not in the past five years? We decided it was time to do something drastic.”

channeled the innovative genius Scandinavians are known for³ and determined the change we needed was to produce more written scholarship.

In a 2013 piece for *The Second Draft*, Iselin and I partnered with our friend and LRW colleague, Amy Stein, to take issue with the question of whether scholarship must be written.⁴ We asserted that presenting at and planning a conference can supply the same conversation, engagement, and teaching that make scholarship an ethical responsibility of law faculty. While we continue to hold this belief, we have come to realize that the connections made at conferences cannot replace the exhilaration one feels when putting the final polish on a written piece that proves a new connection and adds new voice to a scholarly conversation.

But how, even with our proven discipline and work ethic, could we find time to research and write where we had not in the past five years? We decided it was time to do something drastic. Without putting our students second to our scholarly aspirations, we would start doing for ourselves what we had been doing for our students all this time.

The Fika Revived

As fall classes got underway, Iselin and I reinstated the *fika* tradition from our first days together. If not every day, we could schedule⁵ ourselves a healthy portion of mindfulness every Thursday from 1:30-2:30 p.m. at Le Pain Quotidien,⁶ three blocks from campus.

³ See generally, (in no particular order) ABBA, Bjorn Borg, Edvard Munch, Volvo Motors, Roald Dahl, IKEA, Henrik Ibsen, Ericsson, Raoul Wallenberg, Astrid Lindgren, Statoil, Edvard Grieg, H&M, Skype....

⁴ Iselin Gambert, Amy Stein, Karen Thornton, *The World is Not Flat*, 27 THE SECOND DRAFT: THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE 14 (Summer 2013) http://lwionline.org/uploads/FileUpload/LWISsecondDraft_vol27no1b.pdf

⁵ As Scandinavians, we find comfort in having a schedule and sticking to it. See #14 in the list of 20 things to know before you move to Sweden. <https://sweden.se/society/20-things-to-know-before-moving-to-sweden/>

⁶ Offering a delicious pastry selection, including vegan fare. <http://www.lepainquotidien.com/landing/core-menu/>

We realized that if we were not able to engage, on at least a weekly basis, in the same mindfulness our Inns of Court program⁷ urges 1Ls to embrace, then we were hypocrites. After reading Shailini George's excellent article about mindfulness as the cure to the distracted mind,⁸ I had begun opening each of my Upper-Level Writing classes for seminar paper writers with 3-minutes of guided meditation.⁹ The students loved the way it helped them shut out the rest of their classes and stressors for the 55 minutes we had together.¹⁰ Escaping campus to *fika* could provide the stillness and attentiveness that Iselin and I needed.

At our first meeting, Iselin gifted me a small journal, because it does no good to leave a focused, productive conversation with a head burdened with ideas. You have to write down these discoveries to free up your brain, making it more receptive to finding new connections. Iselin and I were finding ways to make the work we assigned our students, like self-reflection journals, work for us. We were beginning to reach a state of balance.

Now at each *fika*, we ask each other open-ended questions and we listen. Just like Iselin teaches her lawyers-in-training to do. When I sent her a draft the night before one Thursday *fika*, Iselin marked it up with questions, not fixes. She was respectful, helping me make it the paper I wanted it to be, not

⁷ <http://www.law.gwu.edu/Students/Pages/InnsOfCourt.aspx>

⁸ *The Cure for the Distracted Mind: Why Law Schools Should Teach Mindfulness*, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2474338>.

⁹ Free audio recordings of short, guided meditation sessions created by the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, which I found via the Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness in Law, can be found here, <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>.

¹⁰ Here is an example of student feedback from the course evaluations, “Starting every session with meditation was the most amazing thing ever. I am at the point where I can't sit down and work properly on a paper without meditating first. I cannot explain how much I have used this semester with school and with work to regroup and recenter. ... I have had serious anxiety over this paper, and this course really helped me conquer it. This was absolutely my favorite class; I thoroughly enjoyed coming every week, and I enjoyed the aura that Professor Thornton created in this room. It was a fantastic class.” There was not one negative comment in the course evaluations about my use of guided meditation in each class.

the paper she might have made it. Her inquisitive comment bubbles urged me, with a mastery of the art of critique, to be more attentive, to clarify my purpose and message. I could see why the Writing Fellows who staff our Writing Center are so grateful for the training she provides in how to give feedback that brings out the best in the writer. This is a skill that will distinguish Iselin's students in future practice, but in this moment, I am the grateful one.

The happy ending to this story is that the paper I was working on got selected for publication in Fall 2015 issue of *Legal Communication & Rhetoric: JALWD*. Ultimately, the published product was even better than I had hoped because of the exceptionally helpful feedback I received from two other LRW colleagues, Jeffrey Jackson and Amy Langenfeld, the peer review editors assigned to usher my paper through the publication process. So positive was my experience, that it has inspired me to conduct a training session for incoming student editors on GW Law's journals about how to establish a respectful, collaborative relationship with authors.

Ultimately, that *JALWD* article came full circle, the perfect demonstration of how an LRW professor can both implement her teaching and find teachable lessons in the writing process. The journal training session has become my new writing project. Iselin has her own exciting endeavor as a commentator on the U.S. Feminist Judgments Project,¹¹ something she will admit she dove into on a *fika*-dare. In the busy spring semester full of motion memos and individual conferences, it was not easy to make time to trudge snow-custed sidewalks to Le Pain Quotidien, but we knew when we got there, we would find the stillness and attentiveness we needed to get these new projects underway.

¹¹ <http://www.thefacultylounge.org/2014/09/cfp-us-feminist-judgments-project.html>

Conclusion

LRW professors have a stronger national support network than most doctrinal professors. At our biennial conferences, generous colleagues offer practical and encouraging presentations on how to get your article published.¹² More frequent regional conferences include ALWD-sponsored Scholar's Forums, "to provide more opportunities for authors to receive input and feedback from their peers on their legal writing scholarship projects ..."¹³ For introverts like Iselin and me, who greatly appreciate the community LWI provides, but return home from conferences drained and exhausted, the *fika* is our refuge. Some weeks we have no work product to share. We simply sit together. "... [T]he true nature of the *fika* is to enjoy time and company with no plan or purpose. To *fika* is not to *do*, but simply to *be*."¹⁴ We talk and chew and listen and sip and new ideas are born. You should try it.

¹² <http://lwionline.org/uploads/FileUpload/ConferenceProgram625.pdf>

¹³ www.alwd.org/grants "Scholars' Forums give legal writing scholars the chance to present their scholarship ideas, works-in-progress, or developed drafts of legal writing articles to a group of other legal writing faculty. ... This event should be limited to sixteen participants [divided into small groups].... ALWD recommends that each group have an "experienced scholar" to lead each group and help give feedback. Scholars' Workshops give participants an opportunity to participate in peer review, with all the benefits of that process to readers and writers. These workshops are limited to sixteen participants Participants must submit a paper in draft to the planners three weeks before the workshop. The planners will assign participants to groups of four. In assigning groups, planners should aim to promote diverse and constructive interactions. Each member of a group should receive the other three group members' papers at least one week in advance. Authors may request specific types of input from the small group on the paper. At the Workshop, each group of four would meet together to discuss the papers. For sixteen participants, the event could last anywhere from one-half day to a full-day."

¹⁴ Averbuch, *supra* note 2.

“For introverts ... who greatly appreciate the community LWI provides, but return home from conferences drained and exhausted, the *fika* is our refuge.”