

Book Journeys Author Interview - Daniel Rechtschaffen - Mar 19, 2015
Dr. Angela Lauria with Daniel Rechtschaffen, author of *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*

The first piece is to just have this very deep kind of long-term relationship with the art that you're creating. ~Daniel Rechtschaffen

Angela:

Well, hey everybody! It's another Thursday and we are here at Book Journeys Radio doing one of my favorite things in the world, talking to authors about how they overcame the obstacles of writing a book and got their message out there in the world, making a difference. Daniel Rechtschaffen is one of those authors. He is the author of *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*. Daniel is a marriage and family therapist and he is an author and he's here with us today. Daniel, thanks for being with us.

Daniel:

I'm so happy to be with you.

Angela:

Awesome. So *The Way of Mindful Education*, this book is for teachers and for students. Tell us what it's about.

Daniel:

So the book is in kind of in four pieces. The first part of it really talks about this burgeoning field of mindfulness and emotional intelligence in schools which is really spreading throughout the world in different schools and even working with some with the Department of Education. So the beginning of it is really talking about this field of bringing these mindfulness skills into the classroom. And then there's some really practical ways that teachers themselves can learn how to do their, develop their own attention, how they can cultivate compassion within themselves, how they can work on their own emotional regulation, work with their own stress. And then the third part of it, the book is really how you can create a mindful learning environment in your school. So how can you bring these ... with the hearts of the teachers and the students in mind? How can you create a really conscious learning environment? And then the last part is the, really an entire curriculum of a lot of different tools and lessons that can be brought into the classroom and taught to the kids themselves. So it's a really, it's a broad book about how to integrate mindfulness and social-emotional learning into schools.

Angela:

And tell me a little more about the teachers and the students. Are there certain types of schools you're targeting or certain age groups of students? Is it specific to America? Tell me a little more about the population you're trying to reach.

Daniel:

Yes, it's very broad. Obviously everybody, every kid, every teacher has their own stresses, has their own difficulty focusing. And so I work with, you know, kindergarten through 12th

grade through high school. And in the book there's, ah, real descriptions of how to work with different age groups. On some level the practices are the same and on some sense they're very different with ah, you know, an elementary age population I talked about how you really need to make these fun games in a fun attention games or fun understanding how to, you know, be kind to each other. And then with high school students you obviously can do more kinda cognitive-based learning, really teaching them about how their brains work, really teaching them, you know, relationship skills, how to communicate better. And I've been traveling around the globe, I've been working in private and public schools and the interest is really up everywhere with kids with learning disabilities, with kids in the autism spectrum. Obviously every parent, every teacher is seeing how it is regulated. Sadly so many of our students are and are really hungry for ways to be able to come in and kind of create readiness for learning. Instead of just trying to get kids to learn Math and Science and Language, how do we get them ready to learn? And a big part of that is teaching these basic relaxation skills, these basic regulation and focusing skills that mindfulness offers.

Angela:

Hmm. So I know you're a marriage and family therapist. How did you decide to write this book? This seems like maybe a little, is this what you do in your business?

David:

So I started, when I started working as a marriage and family therapist, I was working as a school therapist and you know, I had all of these kids being sent in, you know, with ADHD who were having trouble sitting in class, or kids with anger management issues and I started being a long-time mindfulness practitioner myself. I started trying to see, I wonder if these practices, you know, focusing on the breath, focusing on physical sensations and difficult emotions, I wonder how these will work with ah, this was a middle school I was working with. And it worked really amazingly well, these kids who really took these tools in and seemed very empowered by them. And at that time I didn't really know that there was a movement going on and that was kind of the beginning period where a few organizations were starting to go into schools. And I live in the California Bay area and some of those organizations are out here and I, so I started going in and teaching and helping develop some curriculum. And so the last 10 years or so, I've kind of been on this wave of figuring out the best ways to bring mindfulness into schools. So I still have a therapy practice but mostly what I do now is I can help with different schools and school districts in how to incorporate these practices.

Angela:

Wow! And so were you doing that before you wrote your book or did writing your book actually help make that transition for you?

Daniel:

So writing my book, I was already doing it before then. I was already leading a conference. I lead every year, uhm, at the Omega Institute in New York. I've been, for I think eight years now, I lead a big conference where I bring together kind of all the, you know, the ... Daniel Goleman and other very interesting people in the field of mindfulness and emotional intelligence. So I've been really helping convene a lot of this movement. But writing the book definitely consolidated a lot of the work that I was doing and brought me more into it as kind of the main thing that I'm doing.

Angela:

Ok, so give us some of the before and after 'coz that's pretty exciting stuff. I know there are a lot of authors who would love to be running workshops that will make a sale. So how have things been different for you after becoming an author in terms of making contacts with people, getting yeses, and people to agree to work with you? What sorts of things have been easier or harder after the book came out?

Daniel:

Uh, yeah. I hate to let down your ... but it hasn't changed that much. My, it definitely, I get, my email box is twice as full now which I don't know if it's actually a good thing. There's definitely a lot of interesting things that it did that have come through. You know, recently I have been working with uhm the, actually, you know, the Federal Department of Education is interested in studying to use my book as a training manual for their teachers. Uhm, and I don't even actually know if that's gonna end up happening but there's a lot of very interesting things like that kinda in the pipeline of people interested in actually bringing this to a kinda higher level of how we can really work, support teachers to using the book. I'm also at the moment, one of the ways that it has really changed my life, more so than getting opportunities to travel around, is that my publisher, Norton, asked me to turn my book into a workbook, and so I've been actually getting the opportunity to be working as a writer. And I travel a bunch but I'm actually, you know, being able to support myself to some extent as a writer which is definitely a dream.

Angela:

I love that you sound surprised by this. You're like, "So this thing is happening." (laughs)

Daniel:

Yup, I've been surprised and it's been, yeah, happy by that.

Angela:

So what was your vision before you started this project? What were you trying to create and how similar or different is what you have?

Daniel:

So, good question. I would say that ah, well the reason I ended up writing this book was mostly because I've, you know, I worked in classrooms teaching mindfulness and have been doing it for, you know, maybe 10 years or so and every time I'm in a classroom, it always goes a little different than I plan, that I always bring in my plan and I usually throw my plan out the window about halfway through. And I have, you know, amazing experiences with the kids where, you know, learning how to be happy, learning how to be grateful, learning how to focus, and I will end the class and as somebody who's just always loved writing, always, I will always, you know, bring a notebook with me and afterwards just kinda jot down interesting anecdotes or a new kind of concept or a new lesson that kinda ended up coming out. And so I had just, you know, piles and piles and piles of lessons and stories and ideas. And so the writing of it was already really happening before I ever tried to actually consolidate the writing and turn it into something. So on some level I feel like the book ended up writing me. I actually had the profound opportunity that my publisher actually approached me rather than me having this giant concept already. So once, so I had this

massive kind of tomb of writing and then what I ended up having to do was kinda like half through it to try to be able to turn it into something that would actually read well.

Angela:

So were you thinking about doing a book when your publisher came to you or did that come out of the book?

Daniel:

So I, you know, I thank my stars all the time, I, uhm, the way the book ended up kind of coming to me was that I'd had the idea and I had told, at one of the conferences I was leading, I had a conversation with an author about how I had always, you know, how I had all this writing together and how I would love to actually put something together. And this author was published by Norton as well and they said to, and I guess Norton approached them and said, "Hey, we're interested in trying to publish a book on mindfulness in education." And he said, "Oh I know somebody who's doing that." And so they, you know, the universe conspired to put that, land that one right on my lap and uhm, and said, "I've been thinking about it for awhile and kinda hoping to do it but hadn't quite gotten it together." So I wouldn't say that, that's not a recommendation to most authors, just kinda wait around and hope the best comes. (laughs)

Angela:

So, how long...? Right, that doesn't sound like a strategy. So but how long from when they approached you until your book was done? Tell us about that journey and what the book writing and book creation journey was like for you.

Daniel:

Uhm, so the, you know, I went pretty quick there. I think it was about eight months or so, or nine months, maybe a good gestation stage. And I really just, I luckily had been leading, I've been leading this kind of year-long teacher training the year before and I ... finished and I didn't exactly know what I was gonna be doing. You know, I've got a lot of things that I do but I actually had decided to take a good chunk of time. So I was able to be working pretty full-time on the book and for whatever reason the energetic was aligned that I just, I dove into it and a lot of people would ask me like, "How was it that you got the motivation for it?" But my, you know, my wife could tell you very well that like it was more that she would have to pull me away from the writing rather than me needing to do it. I was, I got a bit obsessive about it but in a good way. I was just really excited and energized and uhm, you know, recently I was talking with a wonderful, the author Esther Perel who's an amazing writer of the book, *Mating in Captivity*, and uhm, she was saying...

Angela:

Ah, love her.

Daniel:

She's an amazing, amazing writer and speaker and she said to me, "Yeah my first book just kind of plowed through me and then, you know, the book I'm working on now is this kind of grueling experience." And that was, I had that conversation before I kind of really dove into this second book of mine. And I'm actually having the same experience. With that first, it

was just such a labor of love, it was just, you know, kind of flowing through me, I'd already written so much. And now the second time, it's more, you know the last one I was just rolling downhill. This one, I'm hiking uphill and I don't exactly know why. But uhm, it, you know...

Angela:

Hmm. And what's the story with your second book? Was that idea also pitched to you or was it an idea that you came up with?

Daniel:

This was also pitched to me. I mean this was my, uhm, my publisher Norton, they asked if I wanted to turn the book that I already wrote, *The Way of Mindful Education*, into kind of a more of a workbook curriculum for teachers. So right now, it has a curriculum in it but this next version is really going to be something that, you know, could be given to, you know, a school system as a workbook, as a curriculum for teachers. So I'm actually just adapting the book that I already wrote and putting, you know, more...

Angela:

Oh, so this is the workbook that you were talking about.

Daniel:

Exactly, exactly.

Angela:

Interesting, interesting. So let's talk about what are some of the lessons that you learned in writing the book. What are some of the things that you think made this a positive experience for you in terms of writing it and sort of getting it done working with your publisher? What were some of the big takeaways that you would want to make sure that you're doing again next time?

Daniel:

Well, I had a realization today actually, or maybe last night. I was reading a book, it's out right now, called *The Teenage Brain* which is a very fascinating book. And it was actually talking about how the woman, 'coz the author was talking about how you have to work with your, you know, teenagers are kind of like adults but really they're still kids and you need to teach them like how to, where to sit when they're doing their homework, and how to not have that, you know, cellphone next to them and how, you know, you have to actually still regulate them. And I realized, it was realizing in reading it how much that's true for me sometimes ... and realizing that, first time I wrote my book, I created this space in my office which was really deliberate. So I have two different desks, one of which is a kind of sitting desk where I sit down on the ground and I never let my computer touch it. I just sit there and kind of, you know, meditate and just kind of think about things and then write by hand on paper. And that's where the kind of creativity flows and I really like to create time where I'm just kind of sitting and allowing the words to come, allowing the concepts to come. And you know it's a beautiful, I enjoy that place, that desk a lot where I'm just kind of meditating on these concepts. And then once I have a bunch out, and then I go to my other desk which is across the room and if you know, your just usual desk with a chair, and that's where my computer is. And then I put all of it into and that's where kind of the other side of my brain

jumps in and I start meeting to put it together and form it and make it work and edit it. And that side is much harder for me actually but obviously utterly necessary because it can't just be the raw information that comes from me. Uhm, so one thing that I really learned and I started woke up this morning and I kinda forgotten to that this time, and I rearranged my office to go back into this setting where I realize I really need to create an environment in which that creativity can come through me and where I'm not just kind of sitting in, sometimes you can kinda get lost looking on the computer. It kinda comes up in doing this but really creative space in which the writing's gonna flow.

Angela:

Wow! I love the kind of the environment and the effect it has on you. Do you incorporate mindfulness into your writing practice? Is that an example of mindfulness?

Daniel:

It is, yeah. I definitely incorporate mindfulness and I actually, I'm leading a training this summer or actually next fall at the Esalen Institute, the beautiful place found in the coast of California called Meditative Writing which I'm leading with a friend of mine who's a poet. So we're doing mindfulness and writing together and the, you know, there's this beautiful thing for me is that if I'm, if you know, doing in my usual life and talking on the phone and looking at things on the Internet and then I try to write, there's so many kinda cobwebs of thoughts all over the place that, you know, my writing isn't going to be as fluid, my concepts aren't gonna be as fluid. But when I'm able to actually sit and have a kind of still mind and be able to be in a more contemplative space, then the words that end up coming out, the concepts that come out, the insights that I end up writing, I feel like are far more helpful, are far more insightful.

Angela:

Mmm. Yeah, I had somebody on the show once and I was asking him the same question. I was asking him like what are some of your tips and he talked about the role that walking his dog played in writing his book. And so he was home a lot more and instead of just leaving his dog outside, he would take these writing breaks where he would walk his dog and he'd be writing and feeling like he was doing good, like he was on track, he was writing words, and then he'd take a break to walk the dog. And he'd come back from the dog walk and he'd have like a million ideas and they were better, and he was writing faster and more energized just from sort of stepping away from the intensity of that project. And I thought that was an awesome reason to get a dog. I thought that was a really great way to sort of ...

Daniel:

Step away from the vehicle.

Angela:

Step away from the vehicle. Exactly!

Daniel:

It's a very, I find it a lot. It's very easy to get caught in something and whether it's to me like going out into my garden or whether it's me shifting to writing about something else, you know, something that's a little easier and then I'd come back, that's a really important, especially something like walking your dog, or meditating, or taking a, you know, walk up in

the woods, uhm, gardening, something that's actually much more embodied and present. Then like I'd be able to come back with a kind of fresh, my mind will be fresh rather than this kinda, sometimes the mind gets tense which is where, you know mindfulness is really helpful because when the mind is tense, is really clear ways to stop and breath and sit for a couple of minutes and let the mind kind of relax and open and yeah, it's very helpful.

Angela:

So what for you, what have been the best things that come out of having your own book? I know you said not a lot has changed. Uhm, and so maybe now not external changes but even internally. What do you think are some of the best things to come out of being an author?

Daniel:

Yeah, you know, one of the interesting things that has come out is that I give a lot of talks and I do a lot of trainings. And I'm sitting here and my book is sitting next to me and it's amazing to have all of this kinda whole conceptual framework that I've been kinda working on and thinking about for all these years in this kinda holdable book right here. Here it is, here is my thought ... and you know, one of the very kind of simple things about it is when I'm leading a training, I actually reference my book all the time. I'm thinking like, *Oh yeah, there's this quote*. And then I realize, *Oh yeah, I put that in my book*. And I'll be able to just look into it and so it actually is really helpful to have, uhm, you know, and be able to reference, you know, to help people, *Oh yeah, check this out in my book*. And if a school is interested, I'll say, *Okay, here* and I'll send them my book and say, *This is, you know, if you're interested in what I do, here, check out this book*. And it's a very big calling card that will really show people if they are interested in the work that I'm doing. And I think that I did a really good job of synthesizing not only my work but a lot of the work in this field so that people can check it out and see if they like it or not. And then I end up, when I'm working with folks, they already have a sense of me in the work that we're doing. So there's a kind of jump right there.

Angela:

Yeah. Daniel Rechtschaffen is the author of *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*. I recommend you got to mindfuleducation.com. This is Daniel's website and the thing I think that you will find interesting is, uhm, you see how his work ties in with his book, uhm, speaking events in California and New York, PR events, uhm, but then also, you know, products that he offers, classes he offers. And you can really see how the book ties into the whole package of working with Daniel, that is as an author, I think a great way to think about getting your body of ideas out there in an organized way. So it doesn't stop with the book. The book is just one way that you'll meet some people or to take your relationship deeper with some people. Uhm, but I think it's a great way to kind of tie everything together. So I love this website. I think you should all check it out. We've got a couple minutes left and in our final minutes, what I would love to hear from you is: What is the advice that you give people who say they wanna write a book? What's the advice, what's something you wish maybe you did a little differently or that you would do differently next time? And let's just leave people with a tip that they can take with them and hopefully apply to their practice.

Daniel:

Yeah, so I actually have a few friends who are writing books right now and so I've been working with them and trying to help them get to that process. Uhm, you know a big piece of it is right from the beginning, is just really asking yourself why you're writing the book and really getting into your world of what is, what is this book for you? Why is it coming to you? I'm a big fan, even though mine ended up being grabbed before I may even have been ready for it, is to actually let it kind of gestate, let it be there with you, let be really kind of close to it. If you have a full book, there's some neat, you know, ways that you can look up online around, you know, creating proposals and doing all of that work. But I think that the first piece is, as I did for probably about maybe seven years where I was really kinda holding it in and that kinda not even really talking to many people about it, and just kinda writing and writing and kinda being interested and playing with it here and there, and having a relationship with my book. I had a very deep relationship with it and luckily I've never even had to push it. But the first piece is to just have this very deep kind of long-term relationship with the art that you're creating.

Angela:

Ah, I love that. Have a deep, long-term relationship with the art you're creating. Daniel Rechtschaffen, and I'm gonna spell that for you people 'coz it's so fun: R-E-C-H-T-S-C-H-A-double F as in Frank, -E-N. Daniel Rechtschaffen, you can find his book, *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students* at mindfuleducation.com and I'm gonna guess at amazon.com as well, yes?

Daniel:

Yup! Yeah, thank you so much.

Angela:

Awesome! *The Way of Mindful Education*, pick up a copy of that book. Daniel thank you so much for sharing your book journey with us.

Daniel:

Thank you, it's been great.

Angela:

Awesome. And we will be back next week. Changing the world one book at a time.