

# **Theo Koffler Uses Mindfulness to Break the Bonds that Bind Us**

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*Theo Koffler and her non-profit foundation Between Four Eyes uses mindfulness as a tool to avoid being trapped by past circumstances and set out anew on a path towards present moment awareness and inner peace.*



*Theo Koffler gives art supplies to workshop participants*

Many of us, at one time or another, have contemplated how to go about effecting world peace. With time, most of us relegate wishing for world peace to naïve children. In the adult world, aside from the runway, peace is a knotty issue of ever shifting borders and embroiled conflicts far beyond our control. Theo Koffler has chosen to view the world at the human level in the space between four eyes – where we connect with and express ourselves to others.

“Peace building” as Theo calls it can quickly become disheartening if we lose site of the trees for the forest. Theo emphasizes

framing human problems in human terms: “meeting humanity with humanity.” It is easy to become overly encumbered with a world divided by innumerable borders and a history of constant turmoil. Theo inverts the problem by focusing on the individual human level where the only critical borders she calls our attention to are the false borders between “us and them, me and you”. Theo, and her organization Between Four Eyes (<http://www.btw4eyes.org/>) espouse the philosophy of mindful awareness (mindfulness) and social emotional learning. Mindfulness is a collection of emotional and communicative tools which Theo hopes will “provide individuals with the skill sets needed to better deal with their life circumstances and challenges.”

Between Four Eyes is most active in Rwanda, Israel and Nigeria where they now have greater than 1000 educators and students versed in their curriculum. As part of the program “students meet and share matters of the heart in an open and non-judgmental environment”. The high school curriculum consists of 15 lessons devoted to developing core appreciation for life, inner peace, and open mindedness



*Theo Koffler (front-centre) surrounded by the Between Four Eyes team and workshop participants*

through artistic expression and guided discussions. One gathers that Theo's emphasis on humanity and empathy is a targeted attack on violence by derailing the dehumanization process necessary for it to propagate.

While this approach may seem indirect to some, it only seems so. One needs to remember that there is no such thing as an army of soldiers, but instead, there is only a collection of humans who have been cultured to bear arms. Mindfulness offers a strong counterpoint to habitual thinking and unconsciously learned behaviours such as violence. Whereas issuing an order one army to attack another army is relatively straightforward, issuing the same order to a group of highly self aware and empathic emotional beings is exponentially harder.

Theo came to appreciate the tenets of mindfulness during her experience with Lupus (an autoimmune disorder). She abruptly went from being a dynamic and vivacious business woman to one dealing with day to day shifts in health and abilities. Mindfulness challenges us to step inside ourselves and address the circumstances that can unwittingly define us. Theo "refused to let Lupus be her identity." By making a conscious distinction between herself and Lupus: "I would acknowledge Lupus, but would never be a victim of it and let it be the totality of who I *really* am." Having battled her Lupus into remission Theo came back swinging wielding her new found mindfulness against some of the ills of the world.

We are all, to a large degree, defined by our circumstances and our experiences. The chains that bind us are constructed of the circular self sealing links of negative automatic thinking. Theo, and Between Four Eyes, invite us to explore mindfulness as a tool to break those bonds through introspection and effective management of our emotions and behaviour. In so doing, Theo hopes we are all afforded an opportunity "to escape our **challenging** past **narratives** by refusing to let them define us, and moreover preventing us from falling victim to them again."