Mandala Summer 2024

- Learning Through Doing
  Research

- Social Media & Mental Health
  Academics

- Online Therapeutic Yoga Series
  Community
# MANDALA

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Mandala is the Sanskrit word for “circle” and is a sacred symbol that mirrors a state of consciousness through a concrete pattern. Native Americans use mandalas as healing and transformational art in the sand; art therapists to facilitate healing; and Tibetans as visual representation of Buddhist beliefs. As a universal symbol of healing, the respective circles of the mandala capture the many diverse aspects of the Center’s work: reflection, transformation, spirituality, creation, and lastly, the ongoing journey that continues to shape what we are to become.
From the Director

Throughout the past few years, we experienced severe drought conditions in Minnesota that caused a serious hydrologic imbalance which impacted soil moisture, groundwater supplies, lake levels, and stream flows; this in turn negatively impacted agriculture, public utilities, forestry, and tourism. Those of us who garden experienced firsthand withering plants and stunted produce. What is called for during periods of drought is careful stewardship. Summer 2024 — my how things can change quickly! With relentless rain, we are experiencing nature’s abundance. It is still only July, and plants and gardens are maturing quickly. There is lush, deep green foliage and flowing water everywhere!

As I read the story in this issue of Mandala about Dr. Amy Wheeler and our new online therapeutic yoga series, I found myself thinking about abundance, healing from within, and the importance of stewarding our inner resources. Amy reminds us that breathing has a powerful impact on soothing the mind and that you can always tune your mind and senses inward.

Kit Breshears, the Center’s communications director, and his team of writers have compiled another rich issue of the Mandala filled with stories that illuminate our work and impact. We hope that with each issue, we are able to pull back the veil of what we do at the Center so that you can get to know better our faculty, staff, and students. I was deeply inspired reading the profiles of our health coaching students and the stories featuring faculty teaching the Living on Purpose and Death and Dying courses.

Kit himself is the feature of one story as he doubles as an instructor in the Bakken Center and has developed an immensely popular undergraduate course that examines the implications of social media on mental health. As a communications professional, Kit is very aware of the necessity of social media to educate and market Center programs and services. I appreciate that in his course, he also educates students on the connection between social media use and anxiety, depression, distraction, addiction, and more. As Kit explains it, the purpose of the course is to help students become more conscious, mindful users of social technology.

I remain deeply grateful to all who invest in the Bakken Center, particularly our donors who help both fuel innovation and sustain the foundation that supports our work. Wishing you all summer abundance and all that might bring including time in nature, with family and friends, and much rest and relaxation.

Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN
Founder and Director
Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing

Your support creates a transformative impact on lives, driving innovation in whole person health and wellbeing at the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing. What meaningful philanthropic goals would you like to achieve? For a conversation on how to achieve those goals, contact

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The most effective anti-Vietnam War demonstration I witnessed was a person holding up a butterfly and torching it with a lighter. We were later informed that the butterfly was already dead, but the impact had been made. That act generated more anger and emotion than the daily death count on the nightly news. The lesson I’ve carried with me is that humans often have much more capacity to care about individual lives within sight than we have for larger numbers out of sight.

I grew up in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, back in the 1950s and 60s when it was still forest and farmland. Our home overlooked Andersen Lake, which was pretty much my private playground in a quiet, idyllic setting. Then an avalanche of suburban sprawl began altering the landscape. Shopping malls, industrial sites, hundreds of homes, and roads to connect them all fragmented the ecosystems. For me, it was not just a loss of the landscape, but the creatures each acre of land was home to — I knew the trees that held birds’ nests, the hillsides with fox dens, the patches of milkweed supporting monarch butterflies, each just as precious to me as the one in that demonstration. This fragmentation and usurpation of natural lands is not unique to Eden Prairie, it is just the first place I felt it viscerally.

In 1976, we moved to the small town of Moose Lake — my dad’s hometown, 110 miles north of the Twin Cities. The stretch between the Cities and Moose Lake was a mix of woodlands and farms and was a welcome, restful drive for vacationers heading north. But, just like Eden Prairie, this too began to get developed. Unsightly industrial buildings sprang up, followed by characterless housing developments. I drive this around four times a year. Each trip I discover more of what used to be natural beauty has been replaced by an unrelenting march of more gas stations, fast food restaurants, industrial behemoths, and homes. Rather than looking forward to the drive, I now loathe it — saddened by the degradation in scenery, and the accompanying loss of habitat supporting birds and other wildlife.

This encroachment of human development into previously wild lands is directly linked to the population growth that has taken place on the planet, going from around one billion when my grandparents were born to more than 8 billion today. The consequences of unsustainable population numbers are manifested in well-documented ways, such as climate change, ocean acidification, habitat loss, and species extinctions. What is less talked about is the stress all of this puts on us.

We need nature in our daily lives in order to be whole and well. We yearn for periods of quiet and stillness. When those things we need and cherish are bulldozed down, or are beyond our daily access, we grieve and suffer — a process no less wrenching than the grief we feel for the loss of a loved relative. Perhaps because my life as a wilderness photographer has made me more attuned to wild places, I am nearly constantly mourning the loss of areas I knew as wild. This has taken a tremendous cumulative toll on me.

Trying to bring about awareness and change, many of my fellow artists document the devastating environmental and social consequences of human encroachment on nature in direct ways. I fear we have become numb to those images and stories, just as we became numb to the death counts coming from Vietnam.

The image on these pages is titled 8,097,648,655, from my series, Encroachment. The title of each piece is the world population when I create the artwork (for reference, many scientists feel the earth can only sustain around 2 billion, and we are currently adding over 74 million each year). The green and blue areas of the image symbolize our forests, waterways, and oceans, everything else represents human encroachment into those areas.

This series is the third of four movements in a larger body of work that will be on display beginning August 9th. My hope is that seeing the plight of our planet depicted differently may wake us from our apathetic slumber — that we may begin to take personal responsibility regarding population numbers and make collective efforts to zone future development in ways that take our need for natural beauty into account.

Craig Blacklock’s new work including the Encroachment series, will be on display at the Joseph Nease Fine Art Gallery in Duluth, Minnesota from August 9th through September 27th.
Today, social media functions as a sort of virtual Swiss Army knife—a tool with many purposes adapted to society’s needs.

“From using Snapchat to connect with friends or TikTok to unwind and laugh, finding recipes for cooking via Pinterest, hunting for jobs on LinkedIn, or staying in touch with family members on Facebook, social media is too useful to go anywhere soon,” said Kit Breshears, communications director for the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing.

Despite its benefits, Breshears—who has worked in educational communications, advertising, and marketing for more than 20 years—noticed students struggling with social media and their mental health. This spurred him to create a technology and wellbeing class for undergraduate students in 2014.

Due to its extreme popularity, in Fall 2023 Breshears modified the course—now called CSPH 1203: Implications of Social Media on Mental Health—to hone in on social media’s specific impact on mental health. Due to student interest, he consistently raises the class capacity each semester—now up to 70 students—and has had students of every age, from every college at the University, and even students from every campus in the University system.

“At the Bakken Center, we are very aware of the mental health crisis on campus and the large number of students experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression,” notes Dr. Mary Jo Kreitzer, Center founder and director.

Offering courses to enhance students’ overall wellbeing is consistent with the Center’s mission. “It is easy to fixate on college degree requirements, which are clearly very important. Also important is emerging from college a happy and healthy human being,” explained Kreitzer.

The seven-week online class focuses on social media’s connection to and impact on physical health, stress, anxiety, distraction, addiction, and more. It encourages students to explore how social media use affects them and encourages developing skills to have a more meaningful, mindful relationship with it.

Each week begins with a short video lecture by Breshears, followed by a mix of assignments including reflections on...
“Many social media outlets were designed to create a dopamine response in our brains the ‘feel good’ chemical. That’s why the ‘pull down to refresh’ function is so popular. It’s like a slot machine in the way that you pull down and get a reward.”

-Kit Breshears

How the material relates to them, online discussions with their peers, quizzes, polls, and challenges designed to help students engage deeper with that week’s content. Challenges range from tracking the number of hours they use social media to using an online texting and driving simulator.

It might seem odd that a class focusing on the impacts of social media on mental health is offered online. Joe Gherity, a graduate student seeking a degree in multidisciplinary studies, took the class in Fall 2023. He believes a class like this should be required for everyone. “The course activities will make you realize how addicted you are to certain social media apps,” he said. Since taking the class, Gherity uses an app that restricts his social media use and noticed that he has more patience and space to think.

Another student, Easton Milne, said that “Kit’s course has had one of the largest impacts out of every class I have taken in my college career.” He initially expected the class to put down social media altogether, but it was far from that. Breshears never encourages students to unplug entirely as it’s not realistic for most. In fact, Milne shared that the course material helped him work on his long-distance relationship with his girlfriend.

“The impact the class has on students’ personal lives is largely what makes it so popular — along with Breshears’ clear love of teaching.

“Kit’s enthusiasm for the material is contagious,” said Gherity. Siphakaykham noted that Breshears always brought a positive energy and was receptive to what she discussed in her reflection assignments.

Breshears has a unique ability to connect with his students. Many have stayed in contact and share that they have continued using the strategies they learned in class. He explains that “your experience with social media is going to depend on how you use it. My deepest hope is that students who take this course develop tangible skills for managing how social media impacts their mental health and wellbeing.”
Research and mentorship drive the Integrative Health Research Fellowship Program, which helps integrative health professionals advance their careers.

The word “education” in a university setting often conjures up familiar imagery: lecture halls, laboratory exercises, and discussion groups. These staples of higher education are important, but they often miss the real-world application that makes research a great tool for learning and career advancement.

In 2018, the Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing’s Integrative Health & Wellbeing Research Program (IHWRP) developed a way for complementary and integrative health practitioners to access research experiences and mentorship. Since its inception, the Integrative Health Research Fellowship Program has helped participants advance their careers and learn to conduct more rigorous research that they can then apply in the field for better outcomes in chiropractic care, physical therapy, mindfulness, and other areas of health and wellbeing.

The program fills a critical need for complementary and integrative health (CIH) professionals, who often don’t have the same research opportunities their medical counterparts do. Many CIH institutions do not have programs that combine research and clinical aspects in these fields, and it can be hard for practitioners to take advantage of the National Institutes of Health’s (NIH) “K awards,” a common resource that medical doctors and registered nurses use to further their research careers. K awards are research scientist development grants that fund a significant amount of an individual’s time for multiple years.

“But because complementary and integrative health professionals have often had less research exposure, they aren’t as competitive for these K awards,” said Roni Evans, DC, PhD, director of the IHWRP and the fellowship program. “What we do is try to bridge the gap so they can develop foundational knowledge and skills, identify mentors, and be on a more level playing field.”

Brent Leininger, DC, MS, PhD, can testify to the program’s effectiveness. As a participant, Leininger, recently promoted to associate professor in the Center’s IHWRP, advanced from an NIH K award to leading his own research as a principal investigator. His research delved into the cost-effectiveness of complementary and integrative health therapies for spinal pain and the representativeness of clinical trial populations. He also participated in NIH-funded trials on therapies such as mindful movement to increase wellbeing in older adults and spinal manipulation and self-management techniques for chronic back pain.

“The most appealing aspect of the program was the ability to apply skills and methods I was learning in the classroom within research projects the team was conducting,” said Leininger. “In my experience at the University, the extent of this experiential learning within the program was unique.”
Research as Education

Mentored research lets learners put skills and concepts into practice, discuss the challenges and successes they experience along the way, and brainstorm ways to continue to improve — all while keeping some guardrails in place to help them navigate the complexity of doing research.

“It is rare for an early-career researcher to be able to get the best experience from working on an entirely new research question on their own; they simply don’t get the full depth and breadth of experiences they need,” Evans said. “We like to take a middle-of-the-road approach where a mentee comes up with a new question that can be answered within the scope of an existing research project.”

This approach leaves room for the fellow to focus on an area of interest to them while also being able to build upon a large existing research infrastructure that IHWRP provides, which enriches the experience.

In some cases, a mentee and mentor will co-develop a research question that leads to new study interventions and even NIH funding. Leininger, for example, worked with his mentors to develop and study a new approach for back-related leg pain that took into account patients’ biological, psychological, and social factors.

Doug Kennedy, PhD, assistant professor and mindfulness instructor in the Center’s IHWRP, came to research after a long career in teaching and new teacher preparation. The program appealed to him as a way to learn alongside his colleagues and continue developing relevant skills that were timely, practical, and immediately applicable to his work.

“I had some research experience in graduate school, but clinical trials are very different,” Kennedy said. “The program, especially the trainings and mentoring, helped me improve my research knowledge and skills while providing meaningful and relevant experience on projects.”

An Individualized Program

The Integrative Health Research Fellowship Program has attracted fellows from a variety of backgrounds. Some are practitioners who want to enter research or academia, while others are already in academia but want shift direction or advance their career. “The mentorship and training isn’t one-size-fits-all, but really focuses on the individual researcher and helping develop them in ways that allow them to meaningfully contribute to the team’s projects,” said Kennedy, who credits the program’s close mentorship and professional development focus for a recent NIH award he received for his community engagement work. “One-on-one meetings complement the hands-on experience of working on the project.”

It’s not uncommon for the mentors themselves to grow through the process — Evans said she has learned something new from all of the program’s mentees. Kennedy, for example, helped sow the seeds for Evans and the broader IHWRP team to branch out into the community-engaged research space. Now Evans, Kennedy, and Leininger all work closely together on Partners4Pain, a community-based research project that aims to help people from groups that experience health disparities gain access to evidence-based approaches for managing back or neck pain.

For Leininger, the fellowship program provided crucial experience crafting a research study, covering everything from recruitment protocols to data collection. “Through the training in the fellowship program, I was able to substantively contribute to all aspects of the design and implementation for randomized trials,” he said. “These experiences prepared me to take a leadership role in two large NIH-funded projects as a co-principal investigator with my mentors in a relatively short time span.”

Looking forward, Evans said she plans to expand training opportunities in the program that focus on advancing health equity in pain management — an important area that currently receives too little attention. She also sees opportunities for past participants of the program to pay it forward to new fellows.

“I’m really excited for our former mentees to play a role in mentoring new and junior mentees,” she said. “We have some nice examples already of this taking place and I think it will only make the program better as we do more of it.”
Since 2022, the curriculum has been redesigned to attract, inspire, and train a new generation of health coaches and healthcare leaders.

“It’s the only program with a trauma-informed mental health class and a focus on social determinants of health,” O’Neill says. The curriculum was also shifted to focus on competencies required by the National Board of Health and Wellness Coaching (NBHWC) and support students in passing the organization’s certification exam.

Another goal was to remove barriers to increase accessibility. The program was shortened from three to two years, reducing the time commitment and cost of the program.

“I was really happy to find out that the University has a program because that meant I had access to scholarships,” says Nandi Tippett, who is in her second semester. She also appreciated the program’s commitment to health equity, diversity within the program, and education about diversity and inclusion. Other students have taken advantage of the University’s Regents Tuition Benefit Program, which provides eligible employees with reduced tuition, and other statewide scholarship programs.

Important metrics, such as skills assessments, the number of students who pass the NBHWC exam, patient outcomes, and feedback from organizations where students do internships, will inform the program’s success and future curriculum changes.

“We’re lucky to be located in Minneapolis, where several health care insurance companies are headquartered and they all hire health coaches,” O’Neill says. “It creates a unique opportunity for us and our students.”
MEET SOME OF THE STUDENTS PREPARING TO PARTNER WITH PATIENTS TO ACHIEVE THEIR WELLBEING GOALS.

KAUEH BOYER-HOLANDA

Kaueh Boyer-Holanda was gearing up to become a personal fitness trainer when he first learned about health coaching. “I was also working as a clinic coordinator with a healthcare provider who helped patients with TMJ and head pain, and they told me about it,” he recalls.

Health coaching felt like the perfect way to blend what he learned about mindset and motivation from earning a psychology degree at the University of Minnesota with his passion for health and fitness. Becoming a health coach has taken a big shift in his own mindset. “I’m learning. I don’t have to think of solutions for people,” he says. “Instead, my job is to help them find their own path.”

Being part of the first cohort enrolled in the newly updated curriculum has been a positive experience. “We’re getting an opportunity to give feedback and be teachers as well as students,” he says. As far as what he wants to do after he completes the program, he says, “if I can find someplace where I can do pro bono work and give back to the community, I’ll be happy.”

WENDY COMPOSTO

Wendy Composto spent the early part of her career as a nutritionist in long-term care facilities. “I started realizing that what I was doing was reactionary because, at the point where people were in long-term care, the biggest issue seemed to be that their nutrition could have been impacted much earlier,” she recalls.

She eventually quit and focused on raising her children. Once her kids were in their teens, Composto joined the development team at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, where she does event planning.

One day, an email about the health coaching graduate program landed in her inbox. “Having access to the University’s Regents Tuition Benefit Program for employees helped me decide because it made the program more affordable.” Composto says. “The teachings around self-awareness are already beneficial in helping me understand myself better — like considering what I think and how I project those thoughts to others around me,” she says.

She’s maintained her registered dietician credentials and hopes to spend the next part of her career making an impact by utilizing her nutrition knowledge and coaching skills.
I look back at how helpful it (coaching) could have been to so many patients,” says Elizabeth Dittrich, a former Mayo Clinic nurse. Dittrich, who utilized integrative healing modalities including acupuncture, cranial-sacral therapy, and Reiki for her own wellbeing, was always interested in a more holistic approach to patient care.

After seeing how health coaching benefited some of her family members, she decided to turn in her scrubs and enroll. “The U has such a great reputation, and the elective courses that are offered drew me in, especially the ones I’m taking now on diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

While unsure exactly how she’ll use her health coaching education, she’d knows she’d like to work with underserved populations. “The clinical setting is something I’m comfortable with,” she says.

Rebecca Sandness became interested in behavioral health while working at an outpatient center for children with autism. “I also worked with a health coach for three months and had a transformative experience,” she recalls. “

So far, one of the most impactful things she’s learned in her first year of the program is the power of presence. “We’ve been coaching some students at Concordia University in St. Paul, and what I see in them and myself is that everyone is just go-go-go,” Sandness says. “But just slowing down, taking a breath, and really listening to the person you’re speaking creates such a powerful connection.”

Sandness currently works as a care coordinator at a company that offers autism and mental health services to infants through adults and hopes she might be able to help the organization set up health coaching services for patients one day.
Nandi Tippett has always centered her work around helping others explore ways to engage with wellbeing. She’s worked as a medical scribe and several Minneapolis-based nonprofits, including Reviving Roots, a holistic mental health space that centers Black wellness.

These spaces connected her with doctors, nurses, and mental health experts. “Sometimes it seemed like they didn’t feel they were able to help people like they wanted to,” she says. “But health coaching makes me feel hopeful.”

“We’ve had homework about mindfulness, how to communicate non-violently, giving and receiving feedback, and regulating emotions,” Tippett says. “I love that I’m learning how to help others do that.”

Tippett says she’s excited about all the opportunities available to use her health coaching skills. She’s currently considering pursuing a PhD to research the connection between neuroscience and wellbeing with the goal of showing it’s worth funding.

DOVE Fellowship winner Dola Greene will join the Masters of Arts in Integrative Health and Wellbeing Coaching program in Fall 2024. Greene became interested in integrative health while a student at Coon Rapids High School where she had a class that introduced her to meditation, yoga, Reiki, and Native American healers. “But growing up, I rarely went to the doctor. My parents are immigrants from Nigeria, so many of those healthcare practices moved here,” Greene says.

Administered jointly by the Graduate School Fellowship Office (GSFO) and the Graduate School Diversity Office (GSDO), the Diversity of Views and Experiences (DOVE) Fellowship includes a $25,000 stipend and other financial support.

The fellowship program assists graduate research programs in promoting a diversity of views, experiences, and ideas through recruiting and supporting academically excellent students whose representations of diversity are expressed in its many forms – including, but not limited to, thought, geography, faith, experiences, background, ethnicity, gender, and interests.

“I have this vision of transforming how healthcare is practiced,” Greene says. “I see myself stepping into a role of helping people understand that health is physical, emotional, and spiritual,” she says. “I am Christian and that’s a huge part of who I am, how I view the world, and how I approach and love people.”
At some point in life, we’ll have to ask ourselves hard questions and face difficult decisions. From careers and relationships to how you spend your time, life will require you to take a deep dive into who you really are, what you really want out of life and how you’re going to get there. You’ll look to answer the question, “What makes me want to get out of bed in the morning?”

Since 2013, the course Living on Purpose: An Exploration of Self, Purpose, and Community (CSPH 3211) has helped students answer that question. During this hybrid course, students take deep dives into who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. Class exercises help students find the meaning of their own lives and what it means to live more purposefully, along with how to build a framework to support living on purpose both now while they are in college and into the future.

“It’s a deep dive and a lot of self-reflection into who you are at this time in your life. The course really asks you about the why. Why are you living the life you are living and is it making you happy,” explained Carole Anne Broad, who created the course along with Dr. LeeAnn Melin, who currently serves as Associate Vice Provost for Student Success at the University of Minnesota.

Broad explained that many people just don’t think too much about their own purpose in life, or perhaps they just equate purpose with a single aspect of their life, such as a relationship or a career. However, she explained that when students start looking into their own values, strengths, interests, and passions, it helps them find meaning and purpose however they as individuals may define those qualities for themselves.

The Desire to do More

For 19 years, Broad worked as a senior academic advisor at the University of Minnesota where she helped students chart out career paths. Through years of discussions with students, she developed a strong desire to want to do more to help them navigate those paths successfully, and give them the tools to identify their sense of purpose throughout life - from changing careers, moves across the country, and even the loss of loved ones.

“My true inspiration for this course was being a college advisor and not being able to give students all the time they needed,” she explained. “This was frustrating for me, and hard for the students to not be able to help them dig deeper.”

The course is team-taught, and uses a model designed by Richard Leider, a life coach, author, speaker and Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing. Throughout the course, students work through a variety of assignments ranging from readings and watching videos to conducting interviews, taking part in group discussions, and creating a purpose map to help them set goals identified through their values, passions, and strengths.
Broad along with co-instructor Lisa Clark, noted that most students come into the course thinking purpose is focused on career success. However, in the context of the course, purpose focuses more on a way of going about your life through the lens of where you are in life in any particular moment, and asking yourself if you’re living the life the way you want to live.

“Students begin the course seeking out one true purpose and learn early on that it’s a journey and it can look different as one experiences changes and what is important to them changes,” said Clark, who has helped teach the course for the last six years and also works as an academic advisor. “As we go through different stages of life, our strengths, values, interests, and passions can change and we can re-evaluate what it means to live with purpose.”

For one of the assignments, students are asked to interview someone in their life who they believe is living a life of purpose. Another is to write about their culture as they define it, and how it impacts their sense of purpose in their own life.

And throughout the course, students lean on one another for support, and learn that we’re all different when working to define each other’s individual purpose. “I think students can feel a freedom from hearing from each other and knowing each of them is on an individual path,” Clark explained. “What’s great about the class is we’re not asking anyone to drop their culture. We really allow them to keep their values and explore how they may be different from those of their fellow classmates.”

Dr. Mary Jo Kreitzer, director of the Bakken Center, noted many of the courses students take in college are focused on content or skill acquisition related to their particular area of study. She believes the Living on Purpose course is a great addition to one’s education, as it helps them ponder what they really want to do in life.

“Living a life with purpose is very connected to overall wellbeing. Very interesting research is emerging on the importance of purpose in our lives. For older people, not having a sense of purpose is connected to an increase in mortality. There is strong evidence that purpose is important at every age and stage of life,” Kreitzer said.

**Finding Purpose through Self-Discovery**

At one point, Kreitzer received a handwritten note from a PhD student who was just getting ready to graduate. She wrote that the Living on Purpose course was the most important course she had taken at the University of Minnesota, as the course put her life in perspective and helped her sort out what was most important to her moving forward.

“Reading comments throughout the years is most gratifying as a teacher,” Board said. “There are many ‘aha moments’ during class assignments.”

“It has really impacted my role as an advisor,” Clark added. “It deepens some of my conversations with students and allows us to talk about the ‘why’ in their decision making.”

Looking forward, Kreitzer said the plan is to continue to expand accessibility to the course. It is currently available to undergraduate students with sophomore status or above.

Students have responded overwhelmingly with positive takeaways. Here’s what some had to say after the Fall 2023 course:

- “Helped me build a foundation that I can fall back on in times of uncertainty. Pushed me outside my comfort zone — growth. Improved my sense of self-awareness.”
- “Caused me to reflect more on how I see myself. Gave me a safe space to be vulnerable. Taught me a lot about self-exploration.”
- “More comfortable with vulnerability. More connected to myself. Goals set up to continue growth.”

**Purpose Map**
While teaching classes for the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing, Dr. Tenzin Namdul noticed that students were especially engaged during sessions about death and dying. They had many questions about death, and were keenly interested in Tibetan Medicine and culture, striving to apply their newfound knowledge to their work in nursing, medicine, social work, and more.

An assistant professor and director of the Bakken Center’s Tibetan Healing Initiative (THI), Namdul found himself wanting to dive more deeply with students on timeless questions surrounding death: What is death? And what happens to people when they die? He developed Death, Happiness, & Resilience: Rethinking Care and Wellbeing at the Time of Dying and started teaching the two-credit course this spring.

The course covers a wide range of topics related to death and dying using a social, spiritual, and biological lens to explore historical and cross-cultural philosophies. Through readings and discussions, Namdul fosters understanding of theoretical views of death, death in different societies, and contemporary topics like hospice care and euthanasia. The class culminates with an investigation of rebirth and the afterlife, plus consideration of what makes a “good death.”

Namdul, a medical anthropologist and doctor of Tibetan Medicine, has long been fascinated by the concept of mortality and how people’s views of death shape the way they think and behave individually and collectively. It extends into cultural values, how people care for others who are dying, and how they approach their own aging and mortality. He believes that the Death, Happiness, & Resilience course will help people explore an often stressful or avoided subject while cultivating compassion and fortitude.

“There is so much craving to learn more about death and dying,” Namdul says. “Healthcare providers, faculty, community members who have family members going through the later stages of life — or they are in the later stages of life — have so much interest in this topic. All of the students who joined us this semester are from different professions and cultural backgrounds, which is very interesting and exciting for us.”

Namdul’s course is a good fit for the Bakken Center, with its broad mandate to focus on human health and wellbeing, says Center Director Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN.
A new Bakken Center course leads students into an exploration of mortality and wellbeing at the end of life.

Death and dying is an experience that everyone will encounter, personally and with loved ones, making it an important topic to explore in a safe, sensitive, and supportive environment.

“For many, the topic of death is taboo. Many people find it difficult to talk about, and conversations about death often bring up feelings of anxiety, fear, and sadness,” Dr. Kreitzer says. “I hope the course demystifies death and helps students see that there are ways to both live well and die well.”

A key component of the class is its exploration of Tibetan Buddhist culture and its approach to death and dying. “In Western cultures, death is often feared, mysterious, and private, whereas Eastern cultures like Tibetan Buddhism embrace death because it’s viewed as the ultimate truth that everyone experiences,” Namdul says.

The class is rooted in the Bakken Center’s long commitment to its Tibetan Healing Initiative. “The goal of THI is to develop a comprehensive and integrated understanding of human health and wellbeing by exploring the insights of Tibetan Medicine, contemplative knowledge, and western science,” Kreitzer says. “The course is aligned with this goal as students examine death through a cross-cultural lens that has implications for their own understanding of death as well as care for the dying. Ultimately, a person’s attitude toward oneself, others, and death can shape and inform human happiness and resilience.”

The course is unique because of the Center’s interdisciplinary approach, teaching about death at the intersection of biomedicine, anthropology, social science, contemplative science, and Tibetan Medicine. Its overarching goal, Namdul says, is to help students be more informed about death and dying in order to advocate for themselves and others who might be facing a terminal disease, long-term conditions like Alzheimer’s, or general aging.

“How can we rethink or reevaluate the way we care for dying people?” Namdul says. “We think our students can make a huge impact when they go back to their own professional work, where they can advocate for themselves or others with different policies or practices.”

“The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how unprepared people were to contend with significant amounts of death, and how fearful they are of the unknown,” Namdul says. He hopes that students will be more prepared to have conversations with family members, patients, or co-workers about death and dying and help people ease their fears. Ultimately, he envisions students becoming more resilient in the face of their own mortality.
For Dr. McKenzien “Micki” Fasteland, instructional designer in the Bakken Center’s Learning Resources Group, teaming with Namdi to develop the course came at the right time in her own life. Her grandmother had recently passed away, and she found solace in reading the course materials and engaging with the other media. “I was seeing many ways that people dealing with their own death and people moving into working with people who are dying could benefit from the class,” says Fasteland.

“As I was going through the resources, I was thinking how useful it would be to have these different frameworks for approaching death and dying, not as something to be scared of but as a natural part of life.”

Fasteland found the cross-cultural components of the course especially fascinating, including the exploration of how different cultures prepare for death and define being dead. She also thinks that people will appreciate the approach to rethink death in ways that aren’t steeped in fear and negativity and learn skills to help others do the same.

“Students explore the concept of a good death and question what that means in different cultural contexts and for themselves individually,” Fasteland adds.

“That’s so powerful. How can we as a society reimagine a good death while still recognizing the grief and difficulty? It allows for the hope, the peace, and the welcoming.”

- Micki Fasteland
Bakken Center Director of Education Dr. Megan Voss is leading the revolution at the intersection of education and healthcare.

BY KATIE DOHMAN

Dr. Megan Voss says the Mayo Clinic brought her to Minnesota, but the University of Minnesota kept her here. The now-Director of Education for the Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing arrived in 2006 to intern and work as an RN in the oncology department at Mayo, and a year later she was applying to the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Integrative Health and Healing specialty program offered by the University’s School of Nursing.

“[Between] the demands of the system and working in oncology, I was faced with a bit of death and dying early on in my career and traditional nursing school didn’t prepare me for the care of the mind, body, and spirit for the person in the bed — or preserve my own mind, body, and spirit for a career faced with lots of death and dying,” she says.

Her Bakken Center classes, included in her DNP program, proved transformational: “The courses provided greater depth of understanding of the human experience and impacted people’s wellbeing at their core,” she says.

It didn’t hurt that Bakken Center Director Dr. Mary Jo Kreitzer became her mentor.

“Mary Jo,” Voss says, “is a visionary who dreams and leads fearlessly. That was eye-opening to me—not only the types of possibilities she saw in clinical care situations, but also in people.”

So, Voss says, she didn’t envision having a leadership role at the Center back in grad school, but she did know she wanted to work with Kreitzer. “She remained a constant even when my roles changed,” Voss says. In fact, Kreitzer sought Voss out at one point, inviting her to coffee to discuss a leadership role within the Pediatric Blood and Bone Marrow Transplant program at MHealth/Fairview, headed by Dr. John Wagner.

Voss said yes. “She was really responsible for developing probably the first integrative pediatric blood and bone marrow transplant program in the country,” Kreitzer says. “She made such a difference. It was an enormous challenge to build a new clinical program, and that is essentially what she did. Megan has the intellect, the creative capacity, and the ability to establish trust and relationships that enabled her to do that.”

Voss went on to inhabit other teaching and leadership roles within the Center at the U, and so it felt natural to oversee and collaborate with faculty, staff, and students as the director of education.

“The Center’s teaching philosophy is different,” she says. “So many students say Center courses keep them whole and help them get through other programs of study. That rang true for me when I was a student... I always wanted to be a part of that transformation for other students.”

And, as students will tell you, having an instructor who also maintains a clinical practice, as Voss does, helps keep her tethered to the real-time demands of the workplace students will eventually matriculate to—literally practicing what she preaches.

Voss says she’s especially proud of being an important part of the team that overhauled the Health Coaching curriculum to meet more real-world challenges, alongside making it more accessible and increasing the diversity of both the student body and faculty.

She also is the faculty advisor to the Student Advisory Leadership Council, where she sees her role as “lifting student voices, sharing governance, and allowing their concerns to be heard and ideas they have to transform the way we provide education.”

Erin Fider, student services and academic programs coordinator at the Center, says Voss’ varied roles perfectly primed her to lead. “Megan is able to bring all those different personal perspectives—as a student, faculty member, and staff. She is really being that connective tissue between people who are making decisions and people who are needing to implement them, and able to advocate on that level... it opens possibilities we hadn’t thought of before, having her having been in those roles before that and looking at different program areas.” Fider notes that Voss is not a leader who gives directives, but links people as a team, empowering them to find the right solutions with their shared wisdom.

Kreitzer concurs. “She leads by being an effective role model. She’s very bold and innovative and doesn’t hold back. But she is also a more quiet, gentle leader. She really leads by example and the power of her ideas. By virtue of the relationship she establishes, people have trust and when people have trust in a colleague or leader, it makes it exciting to follow a new path.”

“Gone are the patriarchal days with students giving everything to their grad programs and graduating a shell of their former selves,” Voss says. “They need to continue being who they are: a mother, working nurse, someone on active duty in the military. Our job is to make education work for people and keep them whole throughout this experience—and feel more fulfilled at the end of educational experience, which is the same as the movement toward whole-person care,” she says. “People are seeking unity and healing, and that’s a lot of what the Center has always offered.”
“My main intention is around helping people understand that yoga is for everyone,” says Amy Wheeler, PhD, the facilitator of the Bakken Center’s Online Therapeutic Yoga Series. Wheeler has served as a Professor of Kinesiology and yoga educator for 25 years, and is an emphatic believer that yoga can meet people where they are and translate lifelong skills without centering the values of aggressive, fitness-focused self-improvement. Yoga can be gentle, supportive, and fold into a person’s existing life and routines easily.

From April to October 2024, Wheeler is leading a series of online yoga workshops that focus on specific areas of the body and patterns of regulation in order to support overall wellbeing for participants. Each series consists of four sessions that are held online and last an hour; topics include reducing low back and hip pain, reducing upper back and neck pain, and pacifying insomnia and anxiety. These issue areas were chosen because they arise most often from patients as concerns, and have wide-reaching effects on an individual’s day-to-day life and capacity to thrive.

For Wheeler, success in this program is based on the understanding that a person is a whole system – a person’s wellbeing is not just based on their physical body, but on the health of their relationships and the ease and comfort through which they are able to engage with their daily life. Her thinking is in alignment with the Bakken Center’s approach towards improving community health outcomes through holistic education that values the broadest base possible.
HEALING IS FOR EVERYONE
By Aegor Ray

Mary Jo Kreitzer, PhD, RN, FAAN, FNAP, is director of the Bakken Center and notes that lifestyle factors are an important determinant of our overall health. “Lifestyle factors that play large roles in our overall wellbeing include decisions that we make each day — what we eat, how much we move, the adequacy of our sleep, and how we manage stress and our emotions. Taking charge of our health and wellbeing has never been more important. This is why we invest in community education. We want people to have the knowledge and tools that will help them make good decisions that will lead to meaningful and sustainable change.”

“If you can breathe, you can do yoga,” stresses Wheeler. Her approach suggests that simple, pragmatic, and accessible skill-building helps improve resilience and strength not only for an individual, but for a community as a whole.

“When we are inclusive and increase life experiences in a space, we grow stronger as a community. We can withstand trauma through the inclusion of a variety of perspectives,” states Wheeler. Her perspective finds purposefulness in the intentional offering of this series on Zoom. By offering this series online, participants living with disabilities and chronic pain are able to participate and enrich the program with their own experience without creating additional strain in
their lives. Additionally, participants are able to have their cameras off and have the freedom to modify the practices to their own needs. The practices are easily accommodated for someone sitting in a chair, or for someone who lives with myriad forms of disability that make physical movement difficult. Disability and pain is often seen as a barrier to yoga, but here, those lived experiences are valued, and belonging rather than striving, is emphasized. “The pandemic made us isolated and immunocompromised, and workshops like these can be a lifeline for people to find community,” notes Wheeler. She emphasizes valuing the experience of the participant who is completely new to yoga, and who may face hurdles while accessing this life-sustaining practice. Her model centers on carefulness, offering the opportunity for participants to “dip their toes in,” and for the practices to be complementary with an individual’s existing routines, rather than a total overhaul or interruption that becomes difficult to sustain.

Wheeler’s far-reaching vision encourages subtle systemic transformation. She hopes to offer therapeutic yoga in every University of Minnesota health clinic, and directly impact patients in need, in what is called the salutogenic, rather than diagnostic, approach. The salutogenic approach focuses on promoting health and wellbeing rather than combating disease. This subtle, but fundamental, paradigm shift has a transformative effect on both individuals and communities. She gives the example of an individual
who has back pain. With the diagnostic approach, a doctor might treat the patient with shots or other remedies that immediately alleviate the back pain. With the salutogenic approach, a patient is asked to consider their daily life, perhaps how much sitting or strain they put on their back, and introduce practices that weave into their ordinary routines. For Wheeler, the combination of approaches is key, and a diversity of care practices builds agency and support in a way that is empowering and sustainable.

Strategically, the Bakken Center hopes that this Online Therapeutic Yoga Series attracts newcomers to the practice of yoga, and supports people who are looking for a reason to refresh their practice or work on specific health issue areas. With Wheeler as the steward, and Zoom as the means of delivery, the Bakken Center is committed to closing the gap between health and wellbeing expertise and the wider community.

“Breathing has this powerful impact on soothing the mind. You can always tune your mind and senses inward,” says Wheeler. Her focus on this simple tool of self-regulation is a powerful way to think about how simple it can be to meet people where they are to get them to the next step of their own personal health goals. And in meeting people where they are, the Bakken Center strengthens its relationship to our community and makes healing a practice, not a theory.

While this online yoga series is provided for the community, the Bakken Center has offered academic yoga courses for many years under the direction of Dr. Katie Schuver. In our upcoming fall issue of Mandala, you’ll see an in-depth feature focusing on Dr. Schuver and the academic hatha yoga teacher training program.
Taking Charge of Your Wellbeing

By Jacques Lerouge

Relaunching the Health Information Digital Resource

“The Taking Charge of Your Wellbeing website has been a go-to resource for millions of people throughout the years," says Dr. Mary Jo Kreitzer, director of the University of Minnesota’s Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing. The health information website relaunched at the end of 2023 with new features and improved navigation. “When it was launched almost two decades ago, it was a bold idea to suggest that people need to take an active role - to take charge - in managing and making decisions that impact their health and wellbeing.”

Keeping up with Taking Charge in 2024

In early 2024, the Center welcomed a new Taking Charge Research Assistant, Mobby Agboola, who is pursuing her PhD in Nursing Informatics at the University of Minnesota. Mobby is writing new content for Taking Charge about Arts and Wellbeing, Nature and Wellbeing, and Food and Wellbeing. The existing section focusing on Navigating the Healthcare System will also be expanded, and new content exploring barriers to wellbeing faced by people in marginalized populations will be added to the site.

“It has been fun to hear throughout the years how the public and healthcare providers use the site," says Kreitzer. “With the fall launch of a new online series of classes for persons living with cancer, lots of new information will be added to the site that is covered in the series. This new content will focus on how to partner with your healthcare team and resources for caregivers.”

Visit takingcharge.csh.umn.edu and take charge of your wellbeing today.

TOP 10 COUNTRIES

1. USA 685,911 (39.77%)
2. PHILIPPINES 225,435 (13.07%)
3. INDIA 172,258 (9.99%)
4. UNITED KINGDOM 90,227 (5.23%)
5. CANADA 79,593 (4.61%)
6. AUSTRALIA 59,335 (3.44%)
7. NIGERIA 29,233 (1.69%)
8. SOUTH AFRICA 28,959 (1.68%)
9. CHINA 24,240 (1.41%)
10. MALAYSIA 18,196 (1.05%)