

## **Living Mindfully**

### **By Mel Schwartz**

The expression “being mindful” or “living mindfully” is actually quite paradoxical. For it is exactly when our mind is full that we aren’t mindful. I’m referring to the mind being full of opinions, beliefs, judgments, wounds and personal history. Ironically, to be mindful requires freeing the mind of all that clutter and noise. Being mindful evokes an image of being centered and non-reactive; present in the moment and fully engaged in life. The story of the Zen master and his student wonderfully depicts this state of mind: The student arrived for his morning lesson at his master’s home and was asked by his master if he’d like some tea. The student responded affirmatively, picked up the tea cup and held it for his master. As his teacher poured the tea it began to flow over the cup and spill. The student voiced alarm and said, “master my tea cup is overflowing.” The Zen master responded, “As is your mind, you must empty it before you come toward enlightenment.”

#### *Reacting or responding?*

Being reactive precludes mindfulness. When we’re on automatic pilot, reacting to imagined threats and insults or simply be judgmental of values or opinions that differ from our own, we can’t be mindful. Our thoughts typically require validation and we often choose to invalidate the other’s voice so that ours can be heard. A fundamental problem in our culture of communication is reactivity. Turn on any cable news station and the talking heads are in a constant shouting match. Interruption and rudeness are the norm in these serial monologues. Debate is everywhere as listening has become a lost art. This pattern plagues our personal relationships as well. Being reactive is disrespectful and non-present. A knee jerk reflexive action is mindless. A mind full of automatic and habitual responses that act as a hair trigger to threatening stimuli leaves little room for mindfulness. When your buttons are pushed it’s essential that you take ownership. It is after all, *your* button.

Being responsive, however, is thoughtful. Unlike reacting, which offers no room for contemplation, responding induces a consideration of the other’s statement before your own words leap forth. Taking a brief moment to consider and reflect on your thoughts before speaking is respectful. It indicates that you are honoring what has just been said by your consideration of it. Letting the other person’s words fall into silence before putting forth your own is both respectful and mindful. And it permits you to authentically process what you’re feeling before you speak.

#### *Living without fear*

To move toward living mindfully, we must thoroughly engage our fears as we endeavor to release them. Reactivity springs from fear. The fear may be that “they are wrong” or that “I’m not being heard or validated” or any host of stories that we might conjure up. Most often, it simply arises from our need to be right. No matter what the source, the common denominator of reactivity is fear. It denigrates our lives and our relationships.

Learning to live without fear is the pathway of mindful living. It is in this condition that we become present and that our passion and vitality arise. This permits us to come into our center where we may fully embrace the flow of life. Whereas reactivity is rooted to holding on and clinging to the illusion of the known, mindful living embraces the flux and flow of life's energy and welcomes the ride.

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