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**Being and Mindfulness**

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The other night at a dinner party, a friend described how she tried to practice mindfulness meditation to keep herself from losing it during an utterly wretched seven-hour layover in an airport while she was exhausted, ill and desperate to get home to her children.

“I kept trying to be all ‘Be Here Now,’” she said, “but I just wanted to be anywhere but here.”

We all laughed.

Then she described how, on another day, she’d managed not to bite off the head of a woman who’d been gratuitously mean to her 8-year-old daughter, but instead had *stayed in the moment* and had *connected* and been able to *join* with the woman in an experience of their common, sadly limited, humanity.

At which point, full of congratulations (and suppressing my own story of having lost my temper with a woman in an airport bathroom who, I felt, had addressed my daughter Julia with an unforgivable tone of officiousness and disdain), I was beginning to wonder what body snatcher had taken my cranky friend away and left this kindly, calm, pod person in her place.

Where was the woman I always seek out at school events to laugh with? Where was the black humor, the sense of absurdity?

I felt strangely abandoned.

It was, I realized, my first experience of being on the receiving end of someone sharing their journey on the road to mindfulness, the meditation and life practice that’s all the rage now in psychotherapy, women’s magazines, even business journals, as a way to stay calm, manage anger and live sanely. (David Foster Wallace, too, was writing a novel all about “being in the moment and paying attention to the things that matter,” [this week’s New Yorker](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/090309fa_fact_max) revealed.)

In the past, I’d been only on the other side of the divide. I had, it was true, sensed a certain sadness, even feelings of betrayal, in my husband Max’s reaction to my proselytizing about my Pema Chödrön “Getting Unstuck” CD: “I never thought that you, of all people, would get into that New Age stuff,” he’d said wistfully. But I hadn’t realized that, when a person gets unstuck, the people around her can feel a bit left behind.

It has dawned on me lately, meditating on the Metro, thoughts silenced so completely that I can hear every page being turned by passengers up and down the car (*I am above reading — I am present to myself*) that being fully in the moment, all senses turned on, feeling your hands in your lap and the ground under your feet, is a very good way of not being there at all.

For me, this is a big part of the charm of the whole thing. I mean, it’s a lot easier to feel a loving connection to others — to the madding crowd, that is — when you’re entirely checked out. But it’s not supposed to be that way.

Mindfulness is supposed to bring people together. By embracing your essential humanness, getting in touch with and accepting your body, sensations, emotions and thoughts, you are supposed to join with, and empathetically connect to, all humanity.

“It helps to realize we are not alone,” the psychologist Mary Pipher writes in her new book, “[Seeking Peace: Chronicles of the Worst Buddhist in the World](http://us.penguingroup.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0%2C%2C9781594488610%2C00.html),” an account of how mindfulness meditation helped her recover from the depression and self-depletion that followed the surprise success of her huge 1994 hit, “[Reviving Ophelia](http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780553754254)” and subsequent bestsellers. “One thing I like to do is send my silent good wishes to people all over the world who have problems exactly like my own. Contexts may change, but emotions are universal.”

I have no doubt that this meta-connectedness feels real, and indeed is real, in the abstract at least. But in real-life encounters, I’ve come lately to wonder whether meaningful bonds are well forged by the extreme solipsism that mindfulness practice often turns out to be.

For one thing, there’s the seemingly unavoidable problem that people who are embarked on this particular “journey of self-exploration,” as Pipher has called it, tend to want to talk, or write, about it. A lot. But what they don’t realize — because they’re so in the moment, caught in the wonder and fascination and totality of their self-experience — is that their stories are like dream sequences in movies, or college students’ journal entries, or the excited accounts your children bring you of absolutely hilarious moments in cartoons — you really do have to be the one who’s been there to tolerate it.

For the truth is, however admirable mindfulness may be, however much peace, grounding, stability and self-acceptance it can bring, as an experience to be shared, it’s stultifyingly boring.

I’ve also come to wonder if something desirably human is being lost in all this new and improved selfhood. That is to say: an edge. That little bit of raggedness that for some of us is really the heart of what makes us human.

Shave that piece off, soften it too mindfully, and I wonder if we don’t leave others out in the cold.

I saw this very clearly the other day, in a chance email exchange with my friend D.

She had written me to share some anxieties about the recession. They were very real and very pressing, and in the past, I would have responded with very pertinent examples of how things were much worse for me.

This time, however, tapping into great human reserves of calm and centeredness, I tried instead to lead her into *staying with her feelings*.

“Hang in there. Things will be O.K.,” I wrote.

D., my oldest friend, [has not in the past been shy](http://warner.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/adverse-effects-2/) about implying that there’s something inward-looking and self-indulgent about my professed attempts at being-present-in-the-world. Now she wrote back in outrage, “What did you do with the real Judy? Did you just tell me to hang in there, things will be O.K????”

“It is comforting to me when people say things like that, sorry. SORRY!” I screamed back. “There, is that O.K.?”

And it was O.K. The connection — 43 years of happy shouting — was restored.

Some of us experience our emotions always in capital letters and exclamation points. This isn’t always pleasant but, to go all mindful for a moment, it is what it is, and if you are one of these people then probably one of the great pleasures of your life is finding others like you and settling in with them for a good rant. A world devoid of such souls can be cold and forbidding, and above all terribly, terribly dull.

It is selfish, undoubtedly, to want to hold onto the ragged edges that make me feel genuinely connected, not perhaps to humanity, but to the people I love. But then, the fact is, I can probably beat Mary Pipher hands down at being the worst Buddhist in the world.

Truth is, I just don’t want to let go.