

Simply Mindful

A Daily Practice
To Reclaim Your Life



Albert Bellg

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Appleton, Wisconsin

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This book is for all of us looking for peace and insight when life gets difficult.

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Prelude: Eleanor's Story —

"I suddenly realized I was singing like I used to."

Eleanor was a woman in her early seventies. She walked slowly, slightly stooped, and her face looked strained and defeated. Her husband had died a couple of years earlier, and she was living alone in the small house that they had shared for forty-five years. His life insurance had enabled her to pay off what remained of the last mortgage they'd had to take out on it, and with a bit of savings she was financially able to make ends meet. She had a garden with flowers and a few vegetables, and a small patio under a tree where she could sit in the shade and read on a sunny day.

Then some new neighbors moved into the house next door. They had loud voices and liked to play loud music. When she asked them to turn it down, they sometimes did the opposite. They

had friends with motorcycles who came roaring up to visit them at all hours. They sometimes threw things over the fence, or made rude comments when they saw her in her garden. She felt intimidated and afraid. She had a taller, solid fence built that protected her privacy better when she was in her back yard, but she was still apprehensive about going outside, and she couldn't sit and read without feeling distracted and anxious.

Although the harassment wasn't constant, she was always afraid that it would resume. She kept the windows to her house closed tight so she couldn't hear their voices and music, even in the summer when her poorly insulated house, which had no air conditioning, became dangerously hot. She felt powerless and helpless. She also had no energy left to do the volunteer activities in her community that meant a lot to her. But she didn't want to move from her home and the many good memories it held for her, and she felt trapped.

I met her when she came to one of the first mindful meditation classes I taught after becoming a psychologist. In answer to the question “Why do you want to learn to meditate?” that I usually ask everyone at the beginning of the first class, she commented briefly on having a lot of stress in her life but didn’t say much more than that. I learned her story when she took me aside after the last class and told me the details. I was sympathetic and supportive, but she was dealing with a very difficult situation. Frankly, I didn’t see how she could solve her problem without moving.

To my surprise, though, a few months later she showed up in another meditation class. There was a spring in her step and she was smiling, clearly in better spirits. A few weeks later when that class was finished, she again took me aside to talk.

“I wanted you to know that things are going better for me,” she said. “I was standing at the sink washing dishes a couple of weeks ago, I had the windows open, and suddenly realized I was

singing like I used to. I feel like I've gotten my life back."

That's great, I said. So the people next door have moved?

"No, they're still there, still loud, sometimes," she said. "But I'm different. They don't get to me the way they used to. I'm not afraid to do the things I want to do around the house and in my yard, and I get out more. I'm free. And I'm happy, at least some of the time. Things are still difficult, but it's better. I just wanted you to know."

Introduction:

Living in the Tragic Gap

In the middle of the journey of my life, I awoke and found myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost.

- Dante Alighieri

Like Eleanor, sooner or later most of us will run into a challenge that turns our life upside down.

Whether it's a medical problem, a change in our personal life, the loss of a loved one, a crisis at work, a financial or legal problem, or simply the ongoing stress of daily life that becomes too much to bear, at some point we'll likely become overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Or it might even be worse. It may become impossible to fulfill our own or others' expectations about the work we do or our family role. We may no longer enjoy the activities and

relationships that give our life meaning. Perhaps we lose confidence and self-respect. Or we may lose control over what matters to us, and feel that our life is no longer our own.

If that happens – *when* that happens – we’ll find ourselves experiencing the tension, stress and even grief in the space between *what can be* and *what is*, what we want for our life and the limits that our circumstances dictate. Author and educator Parker Palmer calls this “living in the tragic gap,” and from my own experience, I know that it’s a difficult place to be. When we face a major life challenge that hits us personally, we usually live closer to the painful *what is* than the hopeful *what can be*, particularly if we’re unable to change what’s happening.

In those situations, is there a way to hold tension, stress and grief lets us reclaim our life?

Many things in this world can’t be changed. But as Eleanor found, sometimes we can change. Surprisingly, we can often change our response to

adversity in a way that not only enables us to handle it better, but also lets us see our situation with greater perspective and clarity. We might also see ourselves more clearly and be better able to act on what matters to us.

For example, as a health psychologist over the last two decades, I've worked with medical patients, professionals, family caregivers, and others dealing with medical and personal problems that completely changed their lives. As impossible as it might have seemed initially, many of them found a way to live successfully despite their challenges.

Mindful practice was often an important part of what they did to live with *what is* and move as best they could toward *what can be*. In the face of daunting circumstances, mindful practice helped them – and can help anyone – see and respond to situations more realistically, making them neither too large nor too small. It can help us defuse some of the powerful feelings and negative thoughts we

have about what's happening to us. Being mindful also helps us to stay real and face what's happened without trying to manipulate ourselves into thinking "happy thoughts" that feel like lies. It lets us choose how much of our life is involved with our problems, and how much we focus on who and what we love.

Mindful practice also makes it possible to think differently about ourselves. When serious life problems show up, we might think that it's our fault or that there's something wrong with us. Maybe we accuse ourselves of being "weak" or blame ourselves for not doing what we think we should have done to avoid the problem. Or we may believe or hear from others that we should "snap out of it." As most of us know, the pressure to pretend that nothing's wrong and live up to unrealistic expectations makes the stress we're experiencing even worse.

In contrast to such critical self-judgment, mindful practice opens the door to seeing clearly

and accepting what's happened to us with compassion for our imperfect humanity, just as we might offer caring and understanding to others in a similar situation. Far from being “self-indulgent” or “weak,” research shows that genuine compassion for our own humanity actually allows us to be more resilient in dealing with ongoing difficulties.

I have learned a lot from people facing life-changing difficulties with courage. It has been humbling to work with people whose medical problems or life circumstances force them to live on the edge, yet who are still able to offer care and compassion for themselves and others. Where I've included stories from such remarkable people in this book, I've changed some of the details to preserve their privacy and anonymity.

I am deeply appreciative of how mindful practice can help us clarify what matters. It can help us create the undistracted attention we need to cultivate the relationships, activities, and ways

of being that most deeply express our values, joys and sense of purpose. Whatever tragic gap we may be standing in, mindful practice can help us reconnect with who we are and what we truly care about.

Albert Bellg
Appleton, Wisconsin
September, 2017

How I Started Mindful Practice —

*“When I first tried to meditate,
I couldn’t do it.”*

Mindful practice (also known as meditation) may seem simple. But when I first tried to meditate, I couldn’t do it.

I was a skinny, bushy-haired twenty-year-old, painfully self-conscious, constantly worried and anxious about almost everything except what I knew best, being a student and playing soccer.

But I was getting ready to graduate from college, and I was anxious, scared and more than a little overwhelmed when I realized I had to live in the world and support myself. What I’d read about Transcendental Meditation (TM was the popular form of meditation at the time) seemed promising: it claimed to help people calm their minds and reduce anxiety and stress. College

students got a special discount to learn how to do it, so I signed up.

In a quiet, dimly lit room with the shades drawn in the student union on campus, I was given a mantra (a Sanskrit word I didn't understand) and told to sit and repeat it over and over to myself. I tried my best. What I found, though, was that I couldn't be still. My mind wandered and I was too physically restless to relax. After a few days, I gave it up.

A couple of years later, though, I found a way to meditate that worked better for me: the gentle movements of t'ai chi. As I started taking lessons, I learned that t'ai chi consciously linked the slow movements of the form with the even slower rhythm of my breath. There were physical activities and sensations to focus on – and I surprised myself by being able to do that. T'ai chi made it possible for me to meditate for the first time in my life.

Fast forward through several decades of practicing various forms of meditation and mindful practice, and teaching it to individuals and groups struggling with stress, anxiety, depression, medical problems and other life issues. I still do several different meditative and contemplative practices, but at least once a day I do the simple mindful exercise described below. Like my early successful experience with t'ai chi, it combines awareness of a gentle physical experience (breathing) with a simple and straightforward response to being distracted (bringing attention back to the breath).

This ends your free sample of *Simply Mindful*.

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