



# The Blessings of Authenticity: An Interview with Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn

By Charlie Miles and Richard Prystowsky

*This past July, Paths editorial assistant Charlie Miles and I traveled to Lexington, MA, where we interviewed Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn, the authors of *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*. The warmth, beauty, genuineness, and generosity that permeates their beautiful book also permeates their presence—and their home, where they received us for the interview. No matter that they had just returned the night before from a trip to Germany, where they had given workshops on mindful parenting, they graciously welcomed us into their home. As our children sat on the Kabat-Zinn’s couch, reading—attended to a few times by Myla and Jon, who wanted to be sure that they were okay (“Parents, you know?” Jon remarked to me with a smile and a shrug)—the four of us proceeded to journey through some of the key issues that have made *Everyday Blessings* such an inspirational gift to so many parents.*

*Throughout this journey, Myla and Jon offer insights into how we might awaken to our true potential as full human beings. In this regard, the epigraph that they choose for their book—appropriately, from Rainer Maria Rilke—seems more than apt: “Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.” Deeply feeling such sentiments in our hearts, we can try to be fully present in our family lives, truly loving our children and ourselves, and honoring the spaces that we inhabit, including those that divide us but that we also share. Teaching us how to give ourselves permission to be present at and for our own family life, Myla and Jon ultimately bestow upon us their greatest gift, one that also forms our bond with them as co-adventurers on this most engaging journey of mindful parenting.*

—Richard Prystowsky





## Our Inner Landscape and Parenting

**Jon:** We're happy that you're here, and we're happy to do this.

**Richard:** We're so thrilled, I can't even tell you!

**Charlie:** Yeah. Out of all the interviews that I've done with Richard, this is the one that hits closest to my personal life. The others have been interesting, but this is the one that is closest to my heart. For that reason, I am most nervous about it.

**R:** Yes. With other interviews, as close as I feel to them, there is a distance, some space. But this is so much what we do and talk about, think about, that we are both a little nervous.

**C:** We've organized the questions with the assumption that many people don't know who you are.

**J:** That's a good assumption. We have no idea who we are, so why should anyone else? Of course, ideas are cheap.

**C:** How is your book different from the many child-rearing books that have gone before it?

**J:** It is not as if we have read all parenting books, but I think that we actually say something in *Everyday Blessings* about that. Most books give advice about particular kinds of situations and inform people about normative patterns of behaviors at particular ages. These books reassure parents that what's going on with their child is normal and give them ideas about how to work with it. A lot of parenting books are advice and information based.

There are very few books out there that are about the inner landscape of parenting itself, the actual experience, inwardly, of being a parent, about what's going on in your mind from moment to moment as you interact or interface with your children. What Myla and I tried to do is to paint the territory of the inner and the outer landscape between parents and children. We wanted to have the whole thing point to an inner discipline that allows people to cultivate more presence of mind—more open-hearted, less judgmental presence of mind—as they ride the moment to moment, day to day, month by month, year by year, ups and downs, and challenges of raising children.

**Myla:** I also think that a lot of books for parents are, in some ways, based on what to do in different situations. They may present different approaches to different situations. Sometimes they are almost like a cookbook, "In this situation, this is a good thing to do." Some of those books are actually very helpful because they give you ideas.

But, somebody once characterized our book as "how to *be* while you're figuring out what to do." In a certain way, when you bring awareness to your moments, try to be more present in your moments, a whole universe opens up for you, and you begin to see things you never saw before, both within yourself and also within your children. There is enormous potential

there for growing ourselves, through this process of becoming more aware—what Jon called "the inner landscape"—as well as for being more fully present for our children and in more nourishing ways. There is tremendous potential here for us, both as human beings and as parents, in working with mindfulness from moment to moment in our daily lives.

I'd like to clarify right now that when we talk about mindfulness in the work of mindful parenting, we aren't suggesting that people have to be meditators to be mindful. I myself don't have a formal meditation practice. Working with mindfulness from moment to moment in our everyday lives as parents can be extremely challenging, at least as challenging as sitting with legs crossed in a meditation hall.

We all know as parents that in one moment we might feel that everything is great; we feel very competent in our parenting. Our children are so wonderful. And then, in the very next moment, all hell breaks loose, everything falls apart, our kids are "terrible", we are terrible parents, things are incredibly chaotic and horrible and miserable. We ask ourselves, how did this happen?

It can be tremendously difficult to work with this constantly changing landscape which is parenting, being in relationship within the family. This practice, this moment to moment working with mindfulness in our everyday lives is a huge gift to us because there is so much potential for insight and deep satisfaction.

**J:** Maybe there are one or two more things to say in response to your question. One, Myla has alluded to: I think it would be absurd to say that in order to be a mindful parent you have to be a meditator who sits on a cushion or something like that since really, sitting on a cushion—for anybody who knows about sitting on a cushion—is not enough. There are many formal practices that one might be engaged in at one point or another, but the real meditation practice is how you live your life. From that point of view, what we are saying is that parenting affords an incredible opportunity for cultivating mindfulness in your life as its own spiritual practice, and a very arduous one, a very challenging one, and an extremely beautiful one. It is very, very human.

The Dalai Lama talks about basic human values, and says things like, "My religion is kindness. All we really need to do is to cultivate kindness." He doesn't go around saying that we need to do a lot of heavy duty meditative practices on the cushion. Mindful parenting is a way in which you can do deep spiritual practice without having to go on retreat. In fact, there is a whole chapter in our book about how it *is* a retreat when you take on having children.

The other point I would make is that there is no one right way to parent or to be mindful. This is why this book is different from other books and also more challenging, because it is not giving people advice; it is not saying, "This is *the* way to do it." What it *is* saying is that if you cultivate mindfulness, you will discover deeper forms of intelligence within yourself that might be useful, right in those moments when you are about



to lose it, when you feel overwhelmed by the challenge and the task of parenting. It is based on a trust in our own capacity to be fully present, fully awake, fully alive.

When most people pick up a book on parenting, they want the expert to tell them something useful, not, “Just trust that at that particular moment, if you are aware of the ways in which you are forcing or clinging or holding, you may find a new way of relating, in that moment, that might be tremendously nourishing, not just for you but for your children.” That is a lot to ask from the reader. So, a good deal of the book is sculpted to try to give people a feeling sense of the landscape, as you move through it—through the stories we tell, through the various ways we approach the subject—so that people can almost, by osmosis, by reading the book, cultivate a felt sense of what mindfulness is. We haven’t written a Mindfulness Cookbook, with instructions like, “Step one. Breathe in. Step two. Don’t scream. Count to ten.” All of those kinds of things. We don’t do any of that. We just say that we are all infinitely more beautiful and more creative and more imaginative than we think. There is nothing better than parenting to push those buttons of emotional reactivity and blindness in us; however, we have the potential to really live our lives differently, and doing so would be good for our children and good for us.

**R:** You mention that you, Jon, have a formal meditation practice and that you, Myla, don’t. Many spiritual leaders would say that there are a variety of forms of meditation, only one of which involves sitting on the cushion. Would you, in that regard, say that parenting is itself a meditation practice?

**M:** Absolutely. I think that gardening can be a meditation practice. Anything in your life can be a meditation practice if you bring awareness to it, if you bring your full presence to it. I think that that is where the potential lies, in bringing that kind of awareness to all of our moments as human beings, whether it is in our relationships with our partners or with our children, or in our work.

**J:** Or with our parents, for that matter.

**M:** We see that a lack of awareness often generates huge suffering and pain in families, in organizations, in the universe. We live in a society with all kinds of time pressures and with the huge irony of having all of these *things* that are supposed to make our lives easier, but that then end up robbing us of huge amounts of our time and attention. I notice people with children talking on their cell phones, one more thing to take people away from the present moment, to take them away from their children. Not that we have to be with our children every moment of the day, but I think that the general trend in the society is toward more busyness and more lack of presence. Mindfulness can bring with it a wonderful new balance. Bringing things back into balance, we can wrestle with the pull of all of these things—TV, computers, phones, faxes—that are constantly pulling us away from *this* moment, *this* place. By making an intentional commitment to bring mindfulness into the home, to this moment, at least we have a way to work with the inevitable toxicity of the society that we are immersed in.

**J:** Mindfulness turns parenting into a meditation practice. Or, another metaphor for it would be a yoga practice—yoga and meditation, of course, being really the same thing. But people think about yoga as stretching, developing strength, flexibility and balance through stretching. Well, nothing stretches you more than parenting, which stretches you to and perhaps beyond your limits. Being sensitive to those limits while you are bending, while you are moving, is a core teaching in yoga. Yoga is about the same thing that meditation is about—understanding your truest nature in relationship to the whole world. If you see yourself as stretching, or cultivating balance or flexibility, then the opportunities to do that are just those things in parenting that we all find so unnerving, the things that frighten us and drive us crazy.

It is not the amount of stress we are under in any given moment that is the problem. The question is, “Can we work with it differently?” We aren’t saying that if you are a mindful parent you will never be angry, or that if you are a mindful parent you will never yell or that there won’t be any chaos in your family. We are certainly not saying that. We *are* saying that all of the normal emotions that we all have as human beings will be present, and the family will be more or less chaotic at different times. But if the whole thing is held in a certain kind of awareness, then we can navigate much more effectively through those ups and downs, and in fact, maybe take the edge off some of them or re-route ourselves in ways that make wiser use of the full range of human emotions. In this way our anger, for example, or our frustration or our disappointment doesn’t become toxic to our children, as it so often does when we start to say things to our child that are degrading or hurtful.

We all have the potential to become more aware of our emotions and how they manifest within the family. If we are angry about something, it may be perfectly valid to have the emotion of anger. We shouldn’t just suppress it, because it is not too healthy to just become the family doormat. However, if we rant and rave like a lunatic all the time, that is also not so healthy. Instead, we might embrace the feeling and ask what is really going on here. We might come to it with a degree of mindfulness. That is what is now being called “emotional intelligence.”

If you were to work with your emotions that way, as a parent, can you see that your children would pick up on that in ways that might be valuable to them? Research shows that, even from infancy, the back and forth between mother and child in terms of feeling, tone of voice, touching, all of those kinds of things enhance dramatically the interpersonal sensitivity, sensibility, and intelligence of the child.

## Writing Everyday Blessings

**R:** In *Everyday Blessings*, you often refer to “life’s unfolding journey.” During your own unfolding journeys as parents, was there a point at which you knew for sure that you wanted



or needed to write this book? How, holistically, did the writing of this book come about and proceed?

**C:** And what, in your personal, individual backgrounds, brought you to that point?

**J:** That's a big one!

**M:** Like a lot of people, I had no idea what to expect when I had children, and I was unprepared for the wonderful strong feelings that I immediately had for my son, who was my first child. It was so powerful for me; the depth of those loving and protective feelings really took me by surprise.

I am a very intuitive person, and I knew, deep down, that I wanted to parent in a way that was more sensitive and heart-felt, trusting my own feelings and being in touch with who my son was. I think now that I chose as role models women who were actually being more present for their children, who were holding them, carrying them, nursing them, doing things in a more nurturing, connected way. I felt extremely happy and fulfilled and satisfied when I was able to be present in this way.

Over time, children grow and their wills develop and they become much more their own person. They begin expressing their own individuality, often by saying, "No!" I wanted to work with this in a way that was different from what I was seeing around me. I gave a lot of thought to my own experience of being a child. When I was growing up, there wasn't much thought given to the interior lives of children. They tended to be seen as tough and resilient. Dr. Spock ruled.

There wasn't a lot of awareness of feelings, nor a lot of awareness of what children really needed. I wanted to bring that kind of awareness to my parenting. For the most part, I found I was able to be more sensitive and attuned to my son.

### ▲ *If you are going to be bringing children into the world, why not give it everything you have got?*

I nursed him, and held him and developed a certain kind of sensitivity which I think was nurturing for him, and very healing for me. In some way, the moments in which I was able to meet his needs, to be aware of what he needed and to respond appropriately, to bring a heartfelt presence to my relationship with him—and of course, later, also to my other children—were transformative for me. Over the years, motivated by my children's wellbeing, I paid attention to my own inner process, what parenting was calling out of me, where my rough edges were, where my limitations were, and how I was working with them.

I was trained as a nurse, and I worked assisting at births in the hospital as well as at homebirths. I began teaching childbirth classes, and I think that in teaching childbirth classes and preparing women to give birth, I was bringing an approach to birthing that was totally in sync with mindfulness. Rather than using distraction methods, which were very

common in those days, the philosophy of our organization, which was called Birth Day, was to bring a more accepting presence to the pain, to the feelings, to really open up to what was happening within ourselves as we were giving birth.

I became very aware that both the women and men in the classes were growing through their bringing awareness to the inner landscape of the beliefs that they were bringing to birthing. What are the ideas and beliefs that we bring to birthing? What feels right to us? Can we bring awareness to our experience of being pregnant and birthing in a way that puts us more in touch with ourselves as we go through the process, and more in touch with our babies?

Birth is an incredible experience. We have a unique opportunity to actually feel what we are experiencing at an extraordinary moment in our lives, even if at times it is painful or scary. Most of us are used to distracting ourselves, or anesthetizing ourselves whenever pain or fear comes up. I was not a person who said, "Oh well. This is not painful." Yes, it is painful. But how do we look at the pain? Do we see it as something that is really terrible? Or can we look at the pain as something that is important and healthy and an integral part of this amazing life process? We can look at parenting similarly. Some moments are tremendously painful. There are moments when, as parents, we just can't believe how much pain we feel. But if we shut down, if we don't look at it, if we just shove it aside, then we do not give ourselves a chance to learn and grow from those experiences.

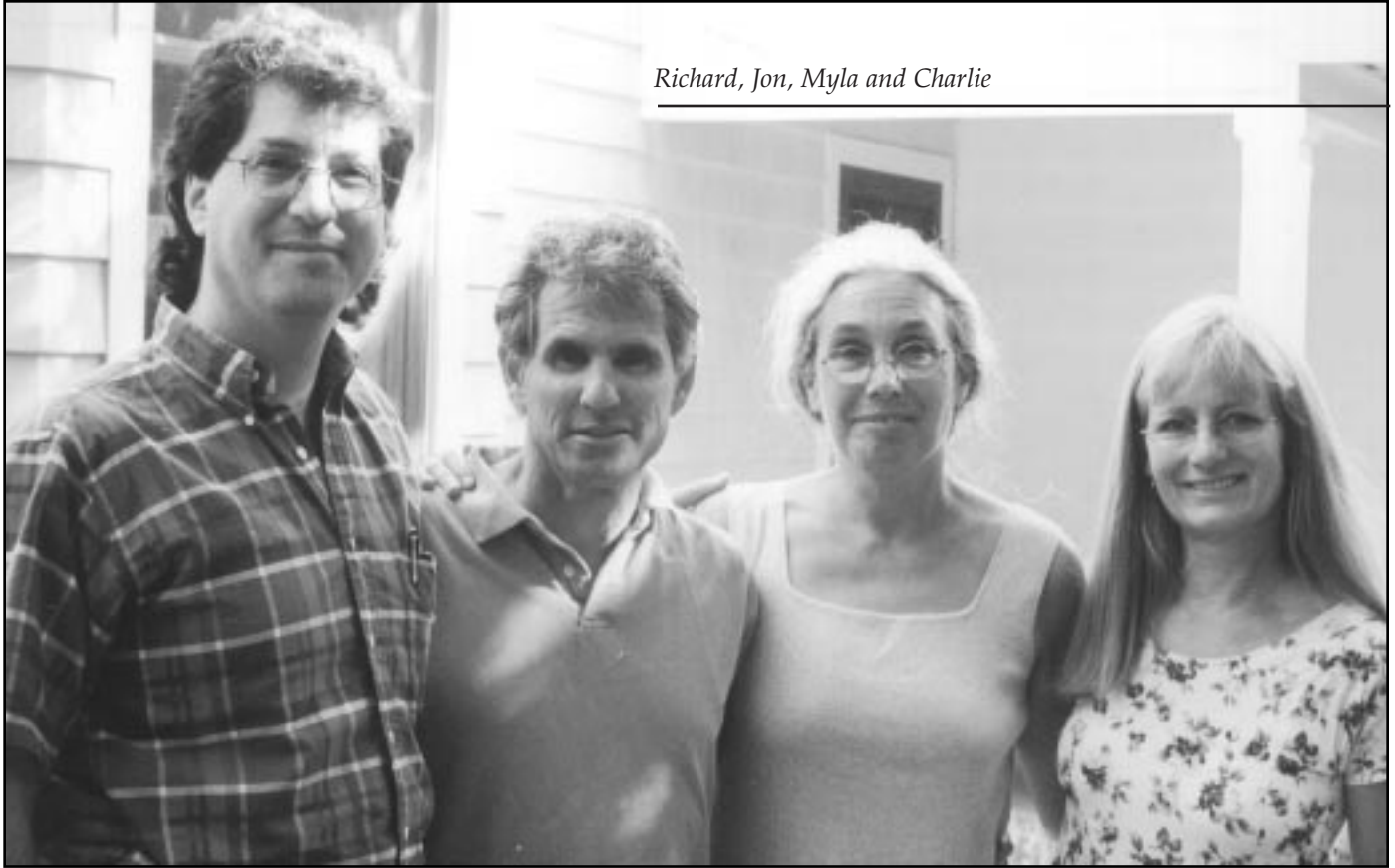
**J:** There are so many adults who will tell you that in some way or other, they were not really seen for who they were when they were children, that they were literally disregarded or disrespected in one way or another. At the Stress Reduction Clinic [at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, which was started by Jon and where he works], one

adult woman once told me something of her family history. There were a lot of children, and at a certain point her mother died. Her father

was a very prominent doctor in the community. From the moment the mother died, her name was never spoken; her existence was never mentioned. Her father remarried, and it just went on from there, because he thought it would be too painful for the children to talk about their dead mother. Well, the amount of damage that that denial caused their psyches was just unbelievable. It was catastrophic. We know more now about the dangers of this kind of emotional denial and neglect, but it is still extremely prevalent. In those days, what the father did was probably considered a fairly sensible way to cope with the situation.

So, I think that what Myla was saying is correct. I really like the way that in Chinese philosophy there is a saying: "No blame." People do the best they can. It is not that people

want to hurt their children. But as the generations unfold, hopefully in one way or another we are accumulating some



*Richard, Jon, Myla and Charlie*

degree of wisdom about the inner life of children and adults and how, when our soul needs are met as little beings, then the sovereignty and autonomy that we all desire for our children manifest, as opposed to being warped or squashed or locked into some kind of tiny space that is so small that it takes the rest of our lives to recover it somehow, if it is possible at all.

**R:** When did you know that you wanted to begin sharing all of this with others, in the form of a book? And how did that proceed?

**M:** Ever since the kids were born, I found myself thinking deeply about parenting and writing down some of my experiences with them. After a while, I realized that it would be very important and satisfying to try to articulate what I was exploring for other parents. At the same time that I was doing that, Jon was doing his work, and I think that there was a kind of coming together of his work and my work in the family.

I have always felt tremendous empathy for children who are



From *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* (NY: Hyperion, 1997):

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph. D., is founder and former director of the Stress Reduction Clinic,

Executive Director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, and Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is known internationally for his work in integrating mindfulness meditation into mainstream medicine. He is the author of the national bestsellers *Full Catastrophe Living* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

Myla Kabat-Zinn, B.S.N., R.N., has worked as a childbirth educator, birthing assistant, and an environmental advocate. For many years she was Co-Director of Birth Day, a Boston area childbirth education organization.

The Kabat-Zinns are the parents of three children.



working together? The challenge is to be able to see the expectations we have and discern which are inappropriate and constrain their sovereignty.

not getting what they need emotionally. I wanted to do something that might affect the way that children are seen and treated by their parents. It can be easy for us to fall into treating our children the way we were treated as children. That's why it is so important to examine the expectations that we have for them and to recognize the judgments that may continually color the way we see things. We can find our hearts shutting down in certain moments when things are not the way we want them to be. And things are rarely the way we want them to be, especially because we have a lot of ideas about how things should be. Children can suffer greatly from that, from having huge expectations put on them, not only by parents but also by schools. How can we have appropriate expectations, expectations that help our children, that support their growth, expectations grounded in basic human values such as respecting each other,



We see a lot of suffering in our workshops. The people we were just working with in Germany [from which the Kabat-Zinns had just returned], —a different country, a different language—sat there with tears streaming down their faces because they were getting in touch with the pain of their own experience and wanting so much to be able to do things in a different way. And so out of that pain comes the impulse to be more conscious.

**R:** As you talked, I was remembering our children’s births. I can see how you and Jon so easily mesh, in terms of the work that you both do, you with childbirth and Jon with working with his patients, and how that work would come together in your parenting. That is a nice mix.

**▲ *What we are saying is that parenting affords an incredible opportunity for cultivating mindfulness in your life as its own spiritual practice, and a very arduous one, a very challenging one, and an extremely beautiful one. It is very, very human.***

**M:** I feel that it evolved organically. For me it was a very inner process. At a certain point, it became clear to me that the unifying thread of my parenting, Jon’s work in the Stress Reduction Clinic, and my teaching in my birthing classes was mindfulness. I don’t want to give the impression that we had our children and then said, “We are going to be mindful parents.” No, we were parents and we had experiences, and out of that experience things grew and evolved.

**J:** It was actually somewhat different for me. I had been observing my parents parent me and my brothers every since I can remember, and have very strong memories of saying over and over to myself as a child, “When I have children I am not going to do it this way.” It is very vivid to me. I remember saying to myself, “These people are out of control and they don’t know what they are doing.” I felt that when I was fairly young, even though I was also conscious of how much they loved me.

I have always loved children, especially babies, and so I had the sense that I really wanted to be a father. I certainly wanted to have children. At that stage of my life, in the late sixties and early seventies, I was also getting more and more deeply into meditation practice and going on meditation retreats that would last from ten days to two weeks. I started that in the mid-sixties, and so by the time our first child came, I realized that becoming a father meant saying goodbye to that lifestyle. Most of the meditation teachers I was studying with were not married and did not have children. It occurred to me that as a father I was not going to be sitting a lot of long retreats; nor was I going to become a monk. I asked myself, “Does this path I am embarking on by becoming a father have the same potential for deep insight and understanding as any other path?” I felt, “Well I don’t know, but I don’t have much choice. It is either that or I just kind of go unconscious and on automatic pilot for the next twenty years.”

So I did have a strong motivation to bring as much awareness to my parenting as possible even before I became a father. I saw parenting, from the beginning, as kind of a long retreat. Perhaps this was just to make me feel better. My training and experience was in the Zen tradition as much as it was in Vipassana tradition, and I kind of grew up with one fairly wild and crazy Korean Zen master, Seung Sahn, who was a really wonderful teacher and who had a profound influence on my understanding of practice. It seemed almost axiomatic to me that this would be a valid thing to do, although perhaps not that easily understood by traditional meditation teachers. I felt that I wanted to be as present as possible for my children, and to see having children not as kind of a signature event on the pathway of becoming an adult—like getting a

raise or getting a better job—but as a fundamental human experience that had enduring value and enduring challenges and was the highest priority. And so... conscious parenting. If you are going to be bringing children into the world, why not give it everything you have got? And I still feel that way.

We wound up cultivating what felt like a really wonderful feeling-state between the two of us around our parenting. We saw a lot of things the same way. It is its own blessing when two parents look at parenting, at the challenges and the children, with more or less the same values, more or less the same framework, more or less the same desire for their well-being, and a commitment to be as present as possible to everything, including the pain and suffering, and to use it in some way. For me, that is meditation practice, whether you are talking about Zen practice or Vipassana practice; this is the core of the practice.

We had three children, and I had written several other books. It felt to me like a natural extension of our relationship, as parents who had worked together at that point for twenty years, to see if we couldn’t articulate some of the special texture and feeling tone of what we felt in our experience. We did not want to suggest that this is *the way* to parent, but to bring an orientation to the possibilities of parenting that could be tremendously valuable. So *Everyday Blessings* is our attempt to articulate, I think, what we experienced over the 24 years of our parenting in a way that might build on whatever one’s own strengths and limitations were already, to see if we couldn’t inspire or touch people to practice in this way.

**M:** I think it important to understand that we use the word mindfulness, but we also mean *heartfulness*. It is not intellectual, as you well know. We talk about affectionate attention. If we can bring affectionate attention to the difficult and stretching moments that we have in our experiences in the family, we have so much more potential for making more appropriate choices and to being more authentic ourselves.



We encourage parents to be more aware of their own feelings and to find appropriate ways, at different ages, to express them to their children. In situations where something makes you uncomfortable, it is important to know that it makes you uncomfortable, and if a child is old enough and it is appropriate, to be able to say that in a way that doesn't put a wall between you, but instead creates an opening. As our kids get older, it happens more and more. Sometimes we can walk around in a sea of worry and anxiety because we can't control things as much as we used to.

When our kids are little we actually have a great deal of control over their environment and their safety, but as they get older we have less and less control. We need to find ways to work with the feelings that come up and be able to see the things that we really do need to be worried about and distinguish them from those that are just creating a lot of tension and division. Was it Mark Twain who said, "I have had many tragedies in my life, most of which never happened.?"

It used to be that you would know the bad things that happened in your own little village. Maybe there was one "No-good-nick," or one person who had something really sad happen to them, or a few of this, or a little of that. Now, we read about every terrible thing that has happened everywhere on the planet, but very little of the good things that are happening every day, and so we can easily lose perspective and feel more and more uneasy and insecure. We need to look at that, to work with our feelings, to see what it is that we are taking in every day, and how toxic much of it is—all of those

**▲ *We are all infinitely more beautiful and more creative and more imaginative than we think. There is nothing better than parenting to push those buttons of emotional reactivity and blindness in us; however, we have the potential to really live our lives differently, and doing so would be good for our children and good for us.***

thoughts, all of those fears, which really don't help us and which we just sort of transfer to our children so that they carry the anxiety as well.

Can we work more consciously with this type of situation? Can we see where our fears come from? Can we choose, perhaps, not to read every terrible thing that has happened, not to watch TV, not to fill our minds with all of this stuff, and start, instead, to look at what is happening in our lives right now? We need to have an awareness of some important world issues and local issues so that we can do good work and make the world a better place; but we also have to be self-protective and actively filter as best we can what takes up residence in the inner landscape of our being.

Recently, we visited the countryside in Norway, where life is very different from here, much slower, and much more simple. I felt a palpable difference in terms of the sense of people who are enmeshed in their environment; they belong, they know what they need to do, and they aren't running around doing a million things at once. It was a reminder of how things used to be and what it is that we are missing.

**J:** If you think about it, the world is changing so fast that no one really knows what an appropriate education for children would really be. However, there is a lot of evidence that if they don't feel good about themselves as adults, then that's not so good. If they have no way of reading other people's emotional states, then that is not so good. If they have no way of sensing their own emotional states, then that isn't healthy. Those are fundamentals that are independent of the incredible time acceleration and the stress that children encounter.

### **Developing a Practice**

**C:** You say in your book, "As I see it, the challenge of being a parent is to live our moments as fully as possible, charting our own course as best we can, above all nourishing our children and in the process growing ourselves." What is a mindfulness practice? How might someone who has never engaged in it begin to develop such a practice in her daily life? What is mindful parenting? And does parenting mindfully cause us to grow ourselves?

**J:** A few small questions. I'd have to say that that is why we wrote the book, and the book turns out to be quite thick, because it is not so easy to get the responses to those questions across. I could easily say, "Mindfulness is a certain way of intentionally paying attention. And that way is in the present moment and non-judgmentally, as best we can in any moment." We might

be quite judgmental in a particular moment, but if we can even pay attention to that, then we won't judge the judging and have it be an infinite regress.

Myla used the term affectionate attention. The word for heart and the word for mind in Chinese and all the other oriental languages is the same word. So, when we talk about mindfulness, it is not just that we *think* heartfulness. It is built in; it is the same, if you understand it that way. It isn't some theoretical construct, not some intellectual pursuit; mindfulness understood this way is a way of *being*.

We talk about this in the Stress Reduction Clinic, too. We see meditation practice as a way of being, not as a technique. There are thousands of meditation techniques. In a sense,



they are like scaffolding used to bring you to a certain place. Once there, you realize that you have been in that place all the time, only maybe not aware of it. It contains this interesting and somewhat paradoxical element. Meditation is about waking up to who you already are; it isn't about changing or fixing anything. It is about being in touch with the full spectrum of your humanity.

That is easy to say, but it's not so easy to do. So that is where the discipline of it comes in. Mindfulness is a form of meditation that is spoken of as the heart of Buddhist meditative practices in all of the various traditions. The Buddha fundamentally taught mindfulness/heartfulness as a path to liberation, to understanding, to realizing what it means to be human. Mindful parenting would be the application of the practice, the discipline of it, to parenting. You have as many opportunities to do that in a day as you would to stretch in any other way, or to pay attention in any other way. In itself, it is a worthy opportunity for cultivating mindfulness.

How the children will be nourished comes, to some extent, from a fact that I spoke about earlier. A great many people report that they never actually felt seen for who they were in their family, or felt seen only on very rare occasions. Most of

**▲ *We can find our hearts shutting down in certain moments when things are not the way we want them to be. And things are rarely the way we want them to be, especially because we have a lot of ideas about how things should be. Children can suffer greatly from that, from having huge expectations put on them, not only by parents but also by schools.***

the time they were seen through the lenses of their parents' expectations, and they would either conform to them or rebel against them. Either way they felt shaped by the lenses of expectations that their parents or other people, including teachers, were looking through. They were not really seen and accepted for who they were. They felt dis-regarded. The word "regard" is in "disregard." *Regarder* in French means "to see."

To actually be seen is a healing experience; to be heard is a healing experience. In that moment when we are acknowledged, i.e., touched, a sense of belonging is generated, a sense of authentication, a sense of respect, that is huge and can be completely wordless and can happen at any age. Perhaps you walk into a doctor's office and the doctor listens to you, and it is unbelievable. You practically want to break down and cry when any authority figure actually listens to you instead of just putting you through the gauntlet of ques-

tions to get the facts or the answers.

In parenting, as in medicine, the fundamental principle would be at least do no harm. This is the Hippocratic principle. The doctor-patient relationship, for instance, is spoken of as a sacred relationship, but it is almost never actually treated that way. It is not held in awareness that way, although now we are teaching medical students to do just that.

The same goes for the parent/child relationship. I see it as a sacred trust. When we have children, what we are saying is, "I am being entrusted by the Universe to carry these beings to the point at which they can carry themselves. It doesn't happen overnight. And I will need to bring my full resources to bear on this." Well, who the hell can do this? It is an impossible job! So, in a sense, at the least we need to know that it is possible that we have a best self, never mind if we can be it. I think we are all incredible beings, geniuses, though highly stressed, moving very quickly, and caught in our own conditioned mind states and feeling states. The challenge of mindful parenting is to stop, to catch oneself from moment to moment, and see if we can't be bigger, if we can't have a bigger awareness than the kind that is narrow or, when we are really threatened, contracted and collapsed. This is, in many ways, a worthy and a sacred calling. The children get nourished at least in

our not doing any harm, and of course, much more so if we can be our best selves at least some of the time.

**R:** We used to say that kids should be seen and not heard, but what you are explaining is that they aren't really seen, either.

**M:** It can be easy to see your children when they are behaving or looking exactly the way you want them to. "Oh, this is my gifted child; this is my

beautiful child." Let me give you an example to concretize some of these ideas. Let's say that a child comes home from school. This child could be 8 or 10 or whatever. Before that child walks in the door, the doorbell rings or we hear them coming in, and all of a sudden we may find ourselves taken over by a whole bunch of feelings, preconceptions, and ideas. Now maybe it is that we are angry that he left his room a mess. Maybe we are worried that he might have a lot of homework, and maybe we are worrying that he isn't going to do his homework, or will need our help. Or maybe it is that we are worried about his friends.

Or perhaps something happened that morning, and we are still carrying a grudge. Or he walked in the door and his face is dirty, or we don't like how he is dressed. We have right here a wonderful opportunity to greet our child as he walks in the door, and what do we do? We fall into these reactive mind-states instead of encountering the present moment fresh. We



bring to this one moment so much baggage, so much that obscures our hearts, obscures our ability to see clearly, that we can't even welcome him home in a genuine way. We have that potential; we have that ability, because, in that moment, as they are walking in the door, we don't actually have to deal with the issues around homework, if there are any. We don't have to immediately deal with what happened this morning. We can make time for that later if necessary without having it ruin the present moment.

**J:** If you have no awareness of what Myla just sketched out, you are going to be caught. If you have an awareness of it, you have at least a fraction of a chance to step around it and just say, "Hi."

**M:** Or just see the child.

**▲** *If we can bring affectionate attention to the difficult and stretching moments that we have in our experiences in the family, we have so much more potential for making more appropriate choices and to being more authentic ourselves.*

**J:** And to greet them in a way that creates a fresh moment. All of the things that you may be worried about might still apply, but when we are unconscious, they basically have us by the throat, and we have the child by the throat. We can create this very complex situation out of our own anxiety. It is unnecessary and just compounds the distance there may be between parent and child.

**C:** I really appreciated the discussions in the book about expectations, especially your saying that we derive our expectations of our children from our own childhoods, from what was put on us. We then project those things onto our children.

**M:** Yes. Sometimes the expectations that we have are really important and helpful. I think it is wonderful to have expectations that children should help out in the family, that everybody should work to support the family and the home, given that it is age appropriate. But we have to be aware of our expectations, first of all. If we aren't aware of them, they can just wreak havoc. And secondly, we have a choice, "Which of the expectations that I am carrying around with me are really helpful, and which of them are getting in the way? Which of them really have nothing to do with *this* child? Or this moment?"

I think that we have so many moments like that. There are appropriate moments for dealing with the fact that the child didn't clean her room, and we do need to talk about it and get her to take responsibility for certain things. There are appropriate moments for discussing our anxieties about certain things. Children can often start fresh in a way that we can't, especially when they are little. We can bring that same freshness to our lives with our kids. You have to think, "What would you want?" Very often, you know, when we walk in

the door, we can feel somebody judging us. As soon as we feel judged, something shuts down. What do we want? Now, maybe somebody doesn't like what we are wearing, but can they still see *us*?

I think that there is a wonderful feeling of safety and security when a child can actually express anger in the family and not be shunned, not be shut out. We have had so many people in our workshops who were not able to express feelings that were considered unacceptable in the family, like anger or frustration. In some families, those things were just not acceptable. The message that emerges is that there is only one acceptable way to be and when you are not that way, there is something wrong with you. I don't mean that our kids can just step on us all the time. It isn't a matter of

everybody just venting all of the time. This is life-long learning that we, and our children, can engage in by being in touch with and honoring what we are feeling and by finding appropriate ways to express it, so that we can be real with each other. We may even choose, sometimes, not to express it. It is an incredible

thing to start paying attention to all of the things that come out of our mouths. Some are better left unsaid, because they are useless, unnecessary...

**J:** shaming, or humiliating.....

**M:** In the extreme. We all fall into unconscious speech and things get derailed by that. If we have a thought, we speak it. Nowadays, if you have a thought you pick up the phone and call somebody—or click "Send."

**J:** And then say, "Ugh, I'm not sure I meant to send that! Maybe I should have had another thought first."

**M:** Bringing mindfulness to our speech, bringing mindfulness to our bodies, bringing mindfulness to our *being* gives our children the gift of our own self-awareness. We are much nicer to be around. It is very hard to be with people who are continually free-associating. So much of it is not helpful.

## Mindfulness and Embodiment

**J:** And that brings up another point that I think we need to stress over and over again. Mindfulness has to do with being embodied. It is not a question of living our lives according to certain principles or theories. In this moment, are you here? Are you in your body? Are you aware of your inner landscape and the outer landscape and can you hold it in such a way that you don't just do that totally reactive, totally mechanical, totally automatic conditioned stuff that we are all completely prone to do?

Some people might think, "Well, if you are a mindful parent, you will be mindful all the time." I don't think it is humanly



possible to be mindful all the time—or even necessarily desirable. But to be even a little bit more mindful, even a little bit of the time, would be hugely healing. Myla and I don't want to create the impression that we think parents should be on the alert all of the time. That is not mindfulness at all. Mindfulness is a relaxed, open, flowing, attentive, openhearted presence. It is the landscape in which life unfolds, one that has potential for being together. You may not necessarily be *doing* anything, but you are *with* your children. You are doing what you are doing; they are doing what they are doing. That can feel so magical, because of the power of wakefulness and the power of presence.

I agree with Myla that our presence itself is a huge gift to our children. And that they see everything about us, our warts, pimples, all of the reactions, all of the incredibly mindless moments, is part of it. We may think that if we were really good at this we wouldn't have any mindless moments. We would never get angry. We would never lose it. We would never have some kind of seizure or spasm over, say, who the kids are hanging out with. There are all sorts of issues that will press parents' buttons. It's not about being a saint. It is about being real, and working with whatever comes up as if it were actually workable and important—not to try to fix it but to see deeply into it. Out of that inner work can come a new way of being.

**R:** In your chapter on family values, you say, “The emotional and physical atmosphere the parents create within the family sets the stage on which the ongoing development of a family's values unfold. The more that mindfulness can be brought to this dimension of family life, the more likely it is that the deep inner values of the family will be held in awareness and accorded priority in parenting decisions.” I have the sense, when I read passages such as this, that many of us reading your book will say either, “Ah, that's so true! I never thought of that,” or “Yes, that's true, I know that already,” and yet be unwilling, or unable, to “embody” our knowledge, to use the word that you yourselves use concerning our modeling or embodying our family priorities and values and the ways in which, as you write, we “conduct ourselves in the ordinary unfolding of our lives.”

What in your view accounts for this cognitive dissonance, this disjunction in what we know to be true already, on the one hand, and how we practice, on the other? How, in practical terms, can we engage in mindful practices that allow us to prevent or work through these disjunctions?

**J:** Wow! That is quite a large question. Well, I'll have a stab at it. I think it says some place else in the book, very early on, that mindfulness is not just a good idea. When you say to someone, “Maybe your life would go better if you just were more present for it and paid attention,” everyone's response would be something like, “Oh great! Why didn't I think of that! I'll just *do* it? Wonderful! Adios! See you later! No problem!” It doesn't work that way. It is good to be reminded of the value of present moment awareness, and some people might have a momentary kind of realization that says, “Oh my god! I know that, but I haven't been living that way.” But that

is where the rubber meets the road. That realization is just the first step.

The next step is to embody it or operationalize it or however you want to put it. I like the term “embody.” Any spiritual discipline involves the challenge of working at the edge, and in working at the edge we find that we have more potential for growing than we thought. Something may happen in the family, say, that causes me to contract, that causes me to become narrow in my thinking and hijacked by my reactive emotions. But even such a moment can itself be seen as an opportunity, in fact, a perfect opportunity, to expand my awareness to include my own feelings in this moment, and perhaps a willingness to try to read them in a way that creates more options for how I might respond in the next moment. There's a difference between *reacting*—which is mindless and automatic, and conditioned—and *responding*, which can be mediated by a moment of mindfulness and clear seeing. The discipline of mindful parenting or cultivating mindfulness in any aspect of daily life comes right in those moments in which you are willing to stand inside that moment and be more present without knowing what is going to happen next.

Obviously, as authors we can't convince somebody to do that. We can just try to create a lens through which a parent might take a look and perhaps resonate with what they are seeing and feel inwardly, “Yes, that makes sense. I agree with that.” But then, there's the challenge of actualizing it in your own life in any moment that matters.

**M:** I am not sure, but I think you are asking, “How do you do that?”

**R:** Yes, and as you are speaking I am wondering that it almost sounds as if what you are suggesting is that this disjunction between what we know to be right and what we do is probably always going to be there to some degree or another, and that the question is bringing awareness to the disjunction as it happens. We are never going to have a state in which there is no such disjunction. Is that correct?

**M:** No, I think there are times when there isn't that disjunction, where you feel as if you are appropriately present. You are aware that it feels right. Now, of course, it is like a yoga pose; you have balance and you feel it, and then all of a sudden you lose your balance.

**J:** But it isn't like, “Oh, you blew it!” because you lost your balance. Instead, part of the nature of being alive is that you go in and out of balance.

**M:** And our children learn from that. Our children learn from watching us, from seeing that we are working with it, and that we can actually acknowledge that we lost our balance. Parents are human. We all make mistakes; we all blow it sometimes; we all lose our balance. The question is, “Can we bring the loving compassion that we bring to our children to ourselves at such times?” And when we bring that loving compassion to ourselves when we blow it, our children learn that it is okay to blow it, that there are times when people do or say things that we later regret.



Of course, we also all have our moments of balance, of harmony.... Those are blessed moments. But sometimes blessed moments also happen when things are in chaos, because there can be some deep change that comes out of that, deep understanding, or something wonderful that emerges from pain and loss of balance. It is how we hold it, how we work with it. There is so much to learn from losing our balance.

**R:** Now, I am a reader, and I am reading this interview, and I come to the part where you just said, “How do we hold it? How do we do it?” I’m saying, “Yeah, that’s my question.” I know that in your book you mentioned the example of hitting your child and then apologizing, and so forth. You also make a point later that we shouldn’t make a habit of constantly having to apologize. How do I work with that moment when I know that what I just did wasn’t right, that moment of cognitive dissonance?

**J:** I want to zero in on your use of that term, because I am trying to wrap my mind around your question. When we say that we have made a mistake, what do we mean? What is a mistake? We aren’t saying that most of what we do are mistakes and if we were more mindful we would have fewer mistakes. A mistake is actually a *mis-take*; our perception is actually an incomplete one, or a mis-perception.

Why? Often because it is colored by emotions that arise in a particular moment, very often fear. We ask people in our workshops in what ways fear expresses itself in their parenting. The answers are infinite. There are so many things that we do out of fear, out of worry. In terms of cognitive dissonance, I think that it arises because people say, “Oh yeah. I know that,” but they don’t *really*. They aren’t really seeing clearly. People say, “Oh yeah. I know cigarettes are bad for me, but I still smoke.” But there is a certain way that people

**▲ *Sometimes blessed moments also happen when things are in chaos, because there can be some deep change that comes out of that, deep understanding, or something wonderful that emerges from pain and loss of balance. It is how we hold it, how we work with it. There is so much to learn from losing our balance.***

haven’t embodied that knowledge that cigarettes are bad. They just kind of know it on a superficial level. A mis-take is when you believe the superficial reality without understanding that the surface is only a surface, and that there is a profundity beneath the surface.

In our workshops, we use the image of the well, for instance. You drop a pebble in the well in the form of a question, and you listen for the splash of the first response: “Why do I even care about mindful parenting? Why have I come to this workshop?” Then we have people follow the pebble down,

underneath the surface, listening for more than that first response.

Even the story we tell of Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady [recounted and commented on in *Everyday Blessings*] is about depth and appearance. In appearance, she was hideous. But Gawain recognizes something deeper, and he doesn’t get caught in the surface ugliness. So much of the time the dissonance happens because we will attach ourselves to the surface and get really attached to that and mis-take or forget that there is something much deeper going on. So then we throw our wisdom out the window, and we feel as if we are having some cognitive dissonance, conflicted, torn between what we did at the moment and how we feel in the next moment, or the next day.

But what is fundamental is not really the dissonance; it is the mis-perception in the moment we acted. If we can literally and metaphorically, in that very moment of anger in which we are going to lose it, come to our senses—and parenthetically, that is why we can actually use that phrase, “coming to our senses” as a good description of Vipassana or of mindfulness—when we return to the original sense impressions, the original seeing, the original hearing, without being colored by our thoughts and opinions, then it is possible to see, not only the surface, but also the totality or the whole. And when I say “see,” I also mean “feel,” “sense,” and “touch.” This is not a theory or a good idea. It is a practice, an opportunity to step fully into that moment, to come to your senses. We are not saying that parents necessarily should formally practice meditation in order to be mindful in this way in such moments, unless they are drawn to do it, but it certainly can’t hurt.

For instance, over 12,000 people have been through our Stress Reduction Clinic over the past twenty-one years to be trained in what we call mindfulness-based stress reduction (or MBSR), which involves both formal and informal meditative practices. Most of those 12,000 people are parents. While mindful parenting is not part of the curriculum, their parenting can benefit as a side product of their taking the program. Their major focus is on health concerns and on problems with stress and pain. But MBSR training certainly involves bringing mindfulness into every aspect of daily living, including the kinds of moments of emotional reactivity I was just describing, as well as training in the formal meditative practices. But remember, they are coming to us as medical patients, with cancer, heart disease, chronic pain conditions, and everything else. So we have to work with them in a particular way that is adequate to their needs. I am not saying that people who want to be more mindful in their parenting might not benefit from cultivating



mindfulness more formally, such as through awareness of the breath, or even formal sitting meditation or mindful yoga, or whatever, just that it is not absolutely necessary for cultivating mindfulness in the pleasant and the difficult moments that are a part and parcel of family life.

For parents who are interested in the formal practices, *Everyday Blessings* offers suggestions for at least the rudimentary cultivation of awareness of the breath, or feeling states in the body, because those can lead us to a more accurate seeing, more accurate perception. We mention two important instructions that I think are very important for parents to know about. One is to bring attention to a particular object, whatever it is, and then just attend to that object for a period of time. If it is the breath, then we attend to the *feeling* of the breath moving in and out of the body, the very sensations of breathing. The second is to begin to notice that the mind doesn't stay still for long, no matter what the object is. It will go off, and do something else. We try to be aware of where the mind went. In the knowing, we reconnect not just with the breath, but with the present moment. There are hundreds of different ways to do this; there are hundreds of different meditation techniques. But whatever method you choose, understand that when the mind goes off, you note where it has gone without judging it or yourself in any way, and then you gently bring it back; the mind goes off, you bring it back—and you do it for its own sake, to come to know your own mind, even when you are not being reactive, even when there are no heavy-duty emotional things going on.

Now, if something comes up with your teenager and the mind goes off, it might go off into kind of a tornado. You can even bring awareness to that. That will make a big difference between whether the tornado carries you into creating more suffering or whether you might do something different by working that edge. I don't know if that answers your question.

**▲ *I think that we feel that we always have to have a solution, that we always have to fix situations, that we always have to know what to do. It is very liberating to understand that there are going to be lots of times, as a parent, that we aren't going to know what to do.***

**R:** I never thought of it like this, but I think you are right. I am thinking of so many examples in which I have seen this now, in which we talk about that cognitive dissonance, but that isn't really it, because we don't really know fully. The dissonance would be true if we really did have a full knowledge of what is "right" and yet acted differently. But in fact we don't really have that full knowledge.

Gandhi says that non-violence comes first and foremost by an appeal to the heart, not to the head. We know lots of things intellectually,...

**M:** That is why using the word "right" is not right.

**R:** Yes, which is why I gestured putting it in quotes.

**M:** It makes it more intellectual. If I only did the "right" thing.

**J:** And it gives the impression, which is wholly wrong, that mindful parenting is about perfect parenting, or the right kind of parenting. If only you were the right kind of parent, then you wouldn't be doing all these dastardly things that you are doing, and you would be so much more mindful and balanced and flexible and everything else.

## Being Mindful, Being Real

**R:** You are saying that being a mindful parent is being an aware parent.

**J:** And being real. And knowing something about it. And embodying it, which means that we can't do it without huge compassion, because if you have a "mis-take," then there is no need for anger or self-blaming. But if you made a "mis-take," you are in trouble, because some stupid person in there made the mistake. Someone has got to be at fault. But if it is a mis-take, then what comes up is compassion, you know? Missed that one, so this happened. There is no blame, as the Chinese say.

We can be more compassionate with ourselves and realize that that moment is gone. I blew it or mis-took it, but now there is this moment. Life will always give you, as long as you are alive, the next breath, the next moment, the next opportunity, to come to it completely fresh, to come to your senses. You can practice, "the mind goes off, you bring it back, the mind goes off, you bring it back," even in the family. I wrote about how much I can get caught up in work

and am not present, or I am on trips or whatever it is, or I sort of veg-out reading the newspaper, or whatever, and I realize that I could live in my family and never really be present, even without traveling anywhere.

**M:** Of course, that doesn't mean that sometimes you

don't read the paper, or veg-out. But again, it is not taking things for granted, and really questioning. What are the things that I am doing that are really meeting my soul-needs and my children's soul-needs? What are the things that are getting in the way? If you spend all your time, every time you come home, reading the paper, being on the phone, this can become a way of life, of always tuning out. We haven't even gone near the whole issue of addiction here. The discomfort we have with feelings and with pain and with unhappiness leads to a lot of addictive behavior in this society. We try to escape from what it is that we are actually feeling. We deal with those feelings by trying to medicate



ourselves, whether it is with TV, or food, or this or that.

**J:** Or, in the family, certain strictures might exist around behavior. For example, “You have to be well-behaved.” I remember, as a child, teachers yelling at me, “Behave yourself!” I don’t think I put this in the book, but my thought at the time was, “What do you think I am doing? I am behaving myself. I’m behaving like the five-year-old that I am.” But of course, what adults really mean is, “Obey me.”

We were just in Germany, and people were telling us that there is a very rigid mentality in Germany. There is one right way to do something. It is a real challenge to get across the notion that there is no one right way, and that the real work here is to see the range of options in the landscape and to navigate on the basis of the moment-to-moment feedback you get.

**M:** It is not an intellectual exercise. I think it is easy to come away thinking that we have all these choices and now it is kind of like a computer game. We just choose the best approach. There is a huge element of intuition here. When you have awareness in this moment, your intuitive self guides you.

**▲ *Sometimes, we are formed by our difficulties. It is easy to get into catastrophic thinking, to think of the worst thing that can happen. I think we owe it to our children and ourselves to really wrestle with that one, and to say, “Okay. I have been through a difficult time, but this moment is this moment. Right now, this is not happening. How do I want to bring myself to this moment?”***

**J:** Or you may not know what to do. And that is another very powerful thing, which we say in the book over and over again. It is okay to realize, “I don’t know what to do. I am at my wit’s end. I feel like I am going to explode.” That is a perfectly normal state for a parent.

**C:** Staying with that and not thinking “I shouldn’t be feeling this way” is really, really hard.

**J:** Yes, and remembering, “I don’t have to fix it.”

**C:** We so often feel that pain is something we are supposed to move away from and take care of, which is where your talk about addictions comes in. All of our lives are about staying away from pain instead of being open to exploring it.

**M:** Rather than moving into it, looking more closely at it. And sometimes it is looking more closely at the not-knowing. I think that we feel that we always have to have a solution, that we always have to fix situations, that we always have to know what to do. It is very liberating to understand that there are going to be lots of times, as a parent, that we aren’t going to know what to do. We are going to be really confused. And it is okay to just stay with that. This comes back to the

notion that mindfulness is not about being a certain way. It is not about always being calm. It’s not about always knowing what the right thing is to do.

**J:** Or being a perfect parent. If you are a perfect parent you have, of course, perfect children.

**M:** It is working with our moments and bringing a certain kind of loving acceptance to the difficulties and to ourselves and to our limitations. The kind of acceptance that we are talking of bringing to our children we have to bring to ourselves.

**J:** I want to put in a word here for mystery. I want to remind us that just being a person, having a body, is a huge mystery. It may seem strange to say that we “have a body,” because *who* has it? Growing up, living one’s life fully, these are things we take for granted and never think about, but they are hugely mysterious. We have a child, we see that child, and know both that we know who that child is and that we have no idea who that child is. The same is true of a relationship. That is something that is worthy of giving us some pause.

**M:** And some humility.

**J:** Yes, humility, too. When parenting children, what is most important is to tend to the relationship between us; to tend to that relationship is a long term thing that isn’t going to be blown by one thing here or there. It is a long-term *weaving*, if you will, of ties and threads of connectedness—by showing caring, and interest, and empathy, and acceptance, and

by honoring a child’s sovereignty and honoring your own sovereignty, so that you aren’t run over or forget about your own wholeness. There is nothing theoretical about it. It is moment by moment.

We tried to give lots of examples in the book of that. The opening one tells the story of when our son, Will, came home from college and of how bent out of shape I was about what time he got home and how I caught myself and luckily didn’t ruin a wonderful moment. I used that as an example because I think people will resonate with the notion that there are times when we can catch ourselves and not go a particular route because we know what doing so will do. It will color everything in a certain way. And then we are surprised by what comes because we did catch ourselves. In a sense, that is a snapshot of what we are asking people to do moment by moment. The camera is turned both outward and inward, simultaneously.

**C:** I loved that example, and also your example of when he wanted to go away to college and wanted to leave with a friend, instead of having the two of you drive him. We had a similar experience when our older daughter went away to graduate school at Cornell.



**R:** Yes, we had assumed that we would, of course, take her. Understandably, she wanted to make the cross-country trip with her boyfriend. Of course that made sense, and of course that didn't make sense.

**J:** Yes, we feel that there is something wrong with this picture. The parents are supposed to be taking the kids to college.

**R:** Yes, the way our daughter did it isn't how it is supposed to be!

**M:** Being able to see things from the child's point of view is an important piece of this. We need to be aware of our own feelings of disappointment and sadness. We can't *just* let go. First we have to acknowledge our feelings, then we have to make an attempt to see it from the child's point of view. Then, holding both in awareness—our feelings and their point of view—we can come to something that is much more nourishing and healing. What an honor for a child to know that we are disappointed, but that we aren't putting a huge guilt trip on them.

**J:** That our life will now suffer because we didn't get our way.

### Everyday Blessings

**M:** You know, I also want to clarify something. I think we have focused a lot in this interview on difficult moments, but it is also important to bring awareness to the seemingly ordinary moments. Waking a child up, tying their shoes, combing their hair, making breakfast, driving them in the car are just ordinary moments that we have with our children, moments that we can actually feel, that we can actually be present for, and moments that can be much richer because of our presence. We don't want to lose sight of that. This is not just about learning and growing through the difficult moments; it is also about the small pleasures that we often miss because we are so automatic and so busy and so often taking things for granted.

**▲** *Why do children love to hear about princes and princesses? It is because each one is a prince or a princess. Children are very often not in their true seeming and so it is a challenge for us to try to see, with our eyes of wholeness, who the child really is, and to see their beauty in their uniqueness, in their unique being.*

**J:** And that is, in many ways, a huge source of joy in parenting — to actually be fully present in those little moments. They turn out not to be little at all; they are huge. When you practice in this way, and it is hard to use the word practice without sounding like it is a rehearsal....

**M:** I actually feel a little uncomfortable with it, too. Sometimes I think it sounds very contrived.

**J:** But I notice that, if I am just observing a mother with her child, it brings me back to when my children were little. I was well aware, in any moment, that the child was digging in the dirt and that I was close by. I could be tuned out or tuned in. I could either be in my own universe and then every once in a while be in touch with the child, or I could really be present. One of the things that I feel strongly about is being as present as possible, and not cluttering the agenda with so many other things that the child ends up being last. Instead of thinking, "As long as they are safe, they are ok," or "Got through the playground today," to understand that "The playground is what life is all about today for me, as the father."

**M:** Without actually assaulting the child with your own needs.

**J:** Right, it is a subtle, intuitive thing.

**M:** You can have a child who is playing in the sandbox and who really just wants to play in the sandbox.

**J:** The last thing they need is their parent.

**M:** We have this obsession, sometimes, with making every moment a teaching moment. Presence does not necessarily mean that you even speak. Sometimes just quiet presence, just being there is wonderful.

First of all you get the pleasure of watching your child explore and engage in whatever they are doing, and also you get to be there as you. Otherwise, we might miss our lives, not be present for our own lives. It isn't just a matter of, "Every moment I am with my child I am going to engage them. I am going to talk to them, and I am going to play with them." Poor child. Children need to have their own space. So can we bring an empathic awareness to what our child needs? They don't need us, necessarily, to engage with them. At a certain point, perhaps, they do. When you bring that kind of sensitivity and awareness to the situation, it is magical.

It is so easy to get a skewed vision of what this means. You have seen people with children sometimes, constantly asking, "Okay?" There is a sort of hovering and questing. This is not about being obsessed with your children. Instead, this is about appropriate presence and awareness which encompasses the child and our-

selves, the air, the trees, and the world that we are in and that very often we are just not *there* for.

**J:** It is wakefulness, wise attention.

**C:** Jon, in *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, you wrote about Myla's saying goodbye to you, and how just the act of saying



goodbye was a present moment between the two of you. I felt deeply touched by that, and this has become one thing that our family tries to do, to make sure that, before we leave, we are fully present with each other.

**R:** When I say goodbye, I want to say, “I am here with you right now. I am hoping that things will be fine when I get back, but if they are is not, I want to at least have had that moment.” I try not to take things so much for granted. Sometimes we have certain experiences, losses or illnesses, that teach us not to take life for granted.

**J:** Yes, although sometimes you do have to have certain experiences to come to that realization, it isn’t at all inevitable. So it might be a good thing to come to it before you have difficult experiences that you are contributing to.

**R:** Yes, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Don’t wait until you have a toothache to appreciate your non-toothache.” And this is the point, that we don’t have to wait for a catastrophe.

### Their Needs, Our Needs

In your chapter “Who’s the Parent and Who’s the Child?” you talk about needing to know how the child feels, what they need, what they want. You insist, here, about putting the child’s needs first. Throughout this chapter, without directly referring to Alice Miller, whose work you discuss earlier in your book, you explain many points with which Miller would clearly agree concerning our need as parents not to help create roles for our children in which they become the parent figures meeting our needs rather than vice versa. As you pointedly note, in such unhealthy circumstances, “the child’s own feelings, needs, desires get buried.” Would you please explain how mindful parenting can help us to avoid, as Miller might say, projecting our own narcissistic wounds onto our children, and then using our children to fulfill our needs?

**M:** Well, I think it is totally connected to awareness of that inner landscape. Everybody’s is different and it changes all the time. It comes out of our own experience. Some people seem to relate through their wounds. There are some people

**▲ *I think that there is a wonderful feeling of safety and security when a child can actually express anger in the family and not be shunned, not be shut out.***

who don’t know how to relate in any other way. They have to relate through their pain.

Now maybe it is a temperamental thing. I’m beginning to think that part of this is temperament. Some people are just so sanguine, while others are very melancholic; then there are people who are always coming out of their pain. Now if you

aren’t bringing awareness to that tendency, it creates a lot of havoc, especially when you want your children to take care of it, when you have unmet emotional needs that you want your children to fulfill. If you are not aware of that, it is a huge burden for the children. Can we bring awareness to our own needs? Can we bring awareness to our pain and really look at the ways in which we bring that pain into our relationships in inappropriate ways?

Just to acknowledge, to hear in your own voice the heaviness or the pain, sometimes just over a simple exchange. “How are you?” can carry the weight of our own pain, can say, “Why haven’t you called me? I haven’t heard from you in such a long time.” [Deep sigh.] There is a difference between that and saying, “You know, it has been such a long time since we talked. I am really happy to be talking to you right now.” We are all to one degree or another at risk for unconsciously allowing such unacknowledged needs to get in the way. But we all can also bring awareness to them and choose much more consciously how we will speak, how we will relate.

**J:** And we all have the capacity to *not* let those unacknowledged needs get in the way, although sometimes it may seem, say in the case of our parents—it won’t happen in this lifetime. While everyone may have the capacity, it isn’t going to happen unless the person wakes up to this dimension of reality. But for many parents of all ages, that waking up does happen, sometimes in small ways. But small ways are, nevertheless, ways.

**M:** It might be that, for example, someone is always negative. If you aren’t aware of your own negativity, it just spreads. If everything that comes up is just seen in a negative light, nothing is ever enough; things are always seen through the lens of what is not right. Seeing life this way colors relationships and the experience of living. Can we bring awareness to the filters, to the things that cloud this moment? Sometimes, we are formed by our difficulties. It is easy to get into catastrophic thinking, to think of the worst thing that can happen. I think we owe it to our children and ourselves to really wrestle with that one, and to say, “Okay. I have been through a difficult time, but this moment is this moment. Right now, this is not happening. How do I want to bring myself to this moment?”

I think that that is where the potential lies, so that it is not as if we are pretending that we haven’t had difficult experiences. We are not squashing or ignoring them, but we are not necessarily being ground up by them either.

**R:** I love Miller’s work. I think that in many ways she is just right on. The sovereignty issue, which you discuss as some length in your book, runs counter to the way the culture at large, and many of us, understands our relationship to children. Much of what we do has little to do with giving them sovereignty. In fact, it is quite the opposite, and yet sovereignty is so



crucial, as you suggest in your discussions of mindful parenting. Can you please talk about what you mean by sovereignty, how to give it, why it is so important and so on?

**J:** My guess is that if you read the entire book you would not once find the phrase “giving them sovereignty.”

**R:** You say “according,” which you then parenthetically say means “opening one’s heart to.”

**J:** You have read this book in detail! That’s beautiful. The distinction is important to us, because what we are saying is that children are born with sovereignty. It is not a question of our giving it to them, so much as our not squashing it. So if you hold everybody’s sovereignty in high regard—not just theirs, but everybody’s—then, as we say in the book, it is not just a matter of Little Lord Fontelroys running around completely spoiled, entitled. Instead, according sovereignty has to do with asking ourselves who this child *really* is, in a feeling way. Because, as we said, we can’t possibly know completely, but we can hold that child in awareness and honor their true nature, which is another way of saying sovereignty. Sovereignty is the inherent nature of being of all people and children, in terms of authenticity, autonomy, and unique temperament.

**M:** Again, their true nature.

**J:** When there are no problems in the family, that is easy to do. The kids look great; you can see all their potential and everything else. When they want to go in a direction that we don’t want them to go in, then all of a sudden it is much harder. That is when you have to do what Myla is suggesting, which is to try to see things through the child’s eyes.

It is very hard to put this into one sentence, which is why we used a lot of examples in the chapter on sovereignty. Sovereignty is the child’s inherent state of being, which is, in part, uniquely that person’s and, in part, common to humanity, all together. It is the multi-dimensional beauty of the child. Honoring it requires first that you see it, or feel it, and second that you know how to hold it in a way that serves the deep inner needs of the child. It is not a question of power; it is not a question of entitlement; it is not a question of royalty; but to a certain extent it is related to the old, mythological meaning of princes and princesses in the fairy tales.

Why do children love to hear about princes and princesses? It is because each one is a prince or a princess. We need to see that, which is why we told the story of Sir Gawain and the Loathely Lady. She was not in her true seeming. Children are very often not in their true seeming and so it is a challenge for us to try to

see, with our eyes of wholeness, who the child really is, and to see their beauty in their uniqueness, in their unique being.

**M:** And part of *that* is seeing and knowing that we can’t see all there is to see, that there is that mystery, and that the child is going to have to find their own way. We hold that in awareness, not only the mystery of who this child is, but also the mystery of the path that they are going to have to take. We don’t know, but we support the unfolding of that, so that we aren’t deciding that it “has to be this way,” or, “This is the right path for you!”

**J:** One of the translations of sovereignty is “your own way.” In the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, in Chaucer, which is where the term comes from, and also in the *Loathely Lady*, the answer to the riddle “what is it that all women most desire?” is “sovereignty,” but it is also “her own way.” Not in the sense of “I want my own way,” but in the sense of having the freedom to explore the unfolding of my life as a full human being.

**M:** And so when Gawain gives her the choice of whether to be beautiful by day or by night, he is according her sovereignty, acknowledging her sovereignty. That is the beauty of that story, his being able to acknowledge that.

**J:** That question is such a mind blower. “What is it that all women most desire?” Imagine, they were asking that question! I love the fact that Gawain goes around and just asks everybody, and everybody gives him an answer and he writes them down and he knows, he knows that none of them is the correct answer.

That’s the deep intuition, and in a way what we are appealing to in the readers of our book, in parents, is the deep trust that we started out talking about. That trust says, “You know, there is more to being human than any of us know. We are trustworthy. We are really worthy of trust.”

A lot of the time we don’t feel worthy at all, because of our scars, because of the way that we were parented. We walk around feeling about as worthy as a cockroach. To begin to realize that we are trustworthy and our children need to know that we are trustworthy and to accord them their own path to adulthood—that’s a worthy work, and that, to me, is the work mindful parenting really is. And besides, we are on the same path as our children, only thirty years further along! So it is not like, “Well we know, because we are here.” It is all the same path, and maybe if we wound up parenting ourselves with a little bit more kindness, more awareness, that quote from Rilke in the front of our book would actually become a reality while we still have a chance.

---

# Seven Intentions and Twelve Exercises

---

*Editor's Note: The following excerpt from Everyday Blessings constitutes the book's "Epilogue," entitled "Seven Intentions and Twelve Exercises for Mindful Parenting."*

## Intentionality—Parenting As a Spiritual Discipline

Intentions remind us of what is important. When we form the intention to do something, and that intention in turn informs our choices and our actions, the chances that we will be sensitive to what is important in our lives increase greatly, and we are more likely to see the big picture. Our intentions serve as blueprints, allowing us to give shape and direction to our efforts, and to assess how we are doing as we work at developing something worthy of ourselves and our lives. So at some point, whenever that is, we have to decide what is really important for us, and then work at constantly keeping that framework in mind as things unfold.

In mindful parenting, certain principles are important to affirm from the very beginning. This does not mean that if we already have children, it is too late to become more mindful in our parenting. It means that we begin, when we are ready, wherever we are in our lives, and work with the here and now, formulating the intentions that are important for us to affirm and to implement, and that are realistic. Not only is it never too late to introduce mindfulness into our lives; the very moment that we make the conscious commitment to do so becomes the perfect moment to begin.

Here are some intentions that you may find helpful. Of course, you can also create your own.

**INTENTION ONE:** I will bring my entire creative genius to the work of mindful parenting.

**INTENTION TWO:** I will see parenting as a spiritual discipline, meaning that it provides me with every necessary opportunity to cultivate wisdom and openheartedness in myself, so that I may come to know and express my true nature and share what is best in me with my children and with the world.

**INTENTION THREE:** I will cultivate mindfulness and discernment in my daily life, especially with my children, using an awareness of my breathing to ground me in the present moment.

**INTENTION FOUR:** I will make every effort to see who

my children actually are, and to remember to accept them for who they are at every age, rather than be blinded by my own expectations and fears. By making a commitment to live my own life fully and to work at seeing and accepting myself as I am, I will be better able to accord a similar acceptance to my children. In this way I can help them to grow and to realize their full potential as unique beings.

**INTENTION FIVE:** I will make every effort to see things from each child's point of view and understand what my children's needs are, and to meet them as best I can.

**INTENTION SIX:** I will use whatever comes up in my own life and in the lives of my children, including the darkest and most difficult times, as "grist for the mill," to grow as a human being so that I am better able to understand my children, their soul needs, and what is required of me as a parent.

**INTENTION SEVEN:** I will fold these intentions into my heart, and commit myself to putting them into practice as best I can, every day, and in appropriate ways that feel right to me and that honor my children's sovereignty, and my own.

## Twelve Exercises for Mindful Parenting

1. Try to imagine the world from your child's point of view, purposefully letting go of your own. Do this every day for at least a few moments to remind you of who this child is and what he or she faces in the world.
2. Imagine how you appear and sound from your child's point of view, i.e., having *you* as a parent today, in this moment. How might this modify how you carry yourself in your body and in space, how you speak, what you say? How do you want to relate to your child in *this* moment?
3. Practice seeing your children as perfect just the way they are. See if you can stay mindful of their sovereignty from moment to moment, and work at accepting them as they are when it is hardest for you to do so.
4. Be mindful of your expectations of your children and consider whether they are truly in your child's best interest. Also, be aware of how you communicate those expectations and how they affect your children.

5. Practice altruism, putting the needs of your children above your own whenever possible. Then see if there isn't some common ground, where your true needs can also be met. You may be surprised at how much overlap is possible, especially if you are patient, and strive for balance.
6. When you feel lost, or at a loss, remember to stand still, as in David Wagoner's poem: "The forest breathes..." Listen to what it is saying; "The forest knows/Where you are. You must let it find you..." Meditate on the whole, by bringing your full attention to the situation, to your child, to yourself, to the family. In doing so, you may go beyond thinking, even good thinking, and perceive intuitively, with the whole of your being (your feelings, intuition, body, mind, and soul) what really needs to be done. If that is not clear in any moment, maybe the best thing is to not do anything until it becomes clearer. Sometimes it is good to remain silent. [Editor's note: Earlier in their book, the Kabat-Zinns use David Wagoner's poem "Lost," which is "based on the Northwest Native American tradition," to help explain what we perhaps ought to do when we are lost, or "not fully awake." They write: "Perhaps what is most important is our willingness to be where we actually are and dwell here fully, in darkness or in light, without having to go anywhere else. Only then may we know where to place our foot when it comes time to move" (370–371).]
7. Try embodying silent presence. This will grow out of both formal and informal mindfulness practice over time, if you attend to how you carry yourself and what you project in body, mind, and speech. Listen carefully.
8. Learn to live with tension without losing your own balance. In *Zen and the Art of Archery*, Herrigel describes how he was taught to stand at the point of highest tension effortlessly without shooting the arrow. At the right moment, the arrow mysteriously shoots itself. Do this by practicing moving into any moment, however difficult, without trying to change anything and without having to have a particular outcome occur. Simply bring your full awareness and presence to this moment. Practice seeing that whatever comes up is "workable," if you are willing to stand in this way in the present, trusting your intuition and best instincts. Your child, especially when young, needs you to be a center of balance and trustworthiness, a reliable landmark by which he or she can take a bearing within his or her own landscape. Arrow and target need each other. Forcing doesn't help. They will find each other better through wise attention and patience.
9. Apologize to your child when you have betrayed a trust in even a little way. Apologies are healing. An apology demonstrates that you have thought about a situation and have come to see it more dearly, or perhaps more from your child's point of view. But we have to be mindful of being "sorry" too often. It loses its meaning if we are always saying it, or make regret into a habit. Then it can become a way for us not to take responsibility for our actions. Be aware of this. Cooking in remorse on occasion is a good meditation. Don't shut off the stove until the meal is ready.
10. Every child is special, and every child has special needs. Each sees in an entirely unique way. Hold an image of each child in your heart. Drink in their being, wishing them well.
11. There are very important times when we need to practice being clear and strong and unequivocal with our children. Let this come as much as possible out of awareness and generosity and discernment, rather than out of fear, self-righteousness, or the desire to control. Mindful parenting does not mean being overindulgent, neglectful, or weak; nor does it mean being rigid, domineering, and controlling.
12. The greatest gift you can give your child is your self. This means that part of your work as a parent is to keep growing in self-knowledge and in awareness. We have to be grounded in the present moment to share what is deepest and best in ourselves. This is ongoing work, but it can be furthered by making a time for quiet contemplation in whatever ways feel comfortable to us. We only have right now. Let us use it to its best advantage, for our children's sake, and for our own.