

MindWipe

Dealing with Stress, Anger, and Ego

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Dedicated, with love and thanks, to my mom.

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Three Deep Breaths

You can do this at any time, wherever you are. Do it right now.

Take three deep breaths.

With the first breath, let everything fall back. Let your shoulders drop and recognize how your body feels. We never realize how stressed or tired we are until we stop moving.

With the second breath, exhale slowly and let yourself rest. Pay attention to your pulse rate. Chances are, it's pretty fast. Let the world be on pause for a moment.

With the third breath, breathe in when you're ready. Don't rush it. Breathe out with extreme slowness. Nothing else matters. In this moment, just be. Enjoy the tranquility of a few seconds in which you think only of your breath.

This technique is quick and simple. It won't solve your problems, but in moments of stress or chaos, it's a quick way to bring yourself back to stillness. It's easy to get lost in the chaos of a moment. Remember what's important. Focus on your breath.

In a later section we'll look at more comprehensive methods.

Mental Floss: Wipe the Mind

Stress is like plaque on your teeth. Just as we must clean our teeth on a regular basis to remove plaque, so too must we take time each day to wipe our minds clean.

Humans have all sorts of ways to de-stress. Some people like to run, while others play an instrument. Some people do yoga, while others beat on a punching bag. There's no one correct answer for how to deal with mental chaos.

It is important, however, to recognize two key distinctions:

1. Having fun doesn't always reduce stress. I love playing video games, but after many years I've come to understand that they don't fight stress. (Many

times they add more stress.) The thrill we get from shooting virtual bad guys is different from the process of cleansing our minds. The same may be true for playing a sport, practicing an instrument, or doing a craft. (Of course maybe you *do* find peace of mind when you play a sport or do a craft. The important thing is that you recognize the difference and acknowledge the truth about whether you're chasing a thrill or cleansing your mind.)

2. Cleansing one's mind will reduce physical stress, but a de-stressed body can still contain a chaotic mind. It's essential that we not confuse relaxation with mental clarity. Our bodies can be at rest while our minds spin out of control. Again, be aware of your state of mind, and be honest with yourself.

The ego loves to trick us into thinking that we're fine when we're not. Returning to the dental metaphor: Just because your teeth feel okay doesn't mean there's not plaque and tartar eating away at the enamel. If you wait for a blinding toothache before you brush and floss, you'll have bigger

problems later on.

As you develop your sense of mindfulness over time, learn to be aware of your mental state — are you tired or tense? Is the world frustrating you today? Do you feel relaxed or impatient? Don't race to fix anything; just be aware. If you learn to recognize these signals, it will be easier to reach a tranquil state of mind.

For many people, the mind is like a glass of water. When it's still, it feels peaceful and serene. (That atoms are constantly moving within a liquid, but a kind of stillness exists.) When it is stirred, however, the water is turbulent and chaotic. Let it be, and the water will return to stillness. It's helpful to think of this stillness as your healthy mental baseline; this is where you want to be, and practicing regular mental hygiene can help you get back there.

Many people cope with stress by adjusting to the chaos. It becomes their baseline, perhaps out of necessity. They may eventually feel fidgety or restless when they have no chaos around them. (This happens to Liz Lemon in the third season of *30 Rock*.) It's easy, therefore, to feel bored in

moments of stillness, as if the lack of stimulation is responsible for problems like anxiety or tension. In my experience, however, this is merely a short-term inversion of the core problem, like taking a painkiller for a sore tooth. You may alleviate some symptoms in the moment, but the deeper problem will remain. Deal with the core problem of stress, and moments of stillness will become a pleasurable relief. Ironically, the best way to deal with the core problem of stress, in my experience, is to spend time being still.

Remember that stimulation is a feedback loop: The more you have, the more you need. But it works the other way too. If you set aside some time to do nothing — no TV, no internet, no books, no cell phone, no video games — you will find it easier to deal with having nothing to do. Reducing stimulation can also help your imagination and creativity flourish. Flooding yourself with stimuli can train you to be passive; when you do nothing, your mind can float more freely. Some of my best, most creative ideas arrived during moments of deep mindfulness.

There is an important interplay between physical stress

and mental stress, so learn to be aware of your physical condition and position. If you're sitting down, consider: Are your feet flat on the floor? Or is one on top of another? Are they bent or twisted, causing tension that you didn't even recognize? Are you slouching, or sitting upright? Are you scowling without realizing it? Are your neck muscles unconsciously tensed up? Putting your body in a relaxed but attentive position can help alleviate mental stress as well.

It's tempting for us to seek total fixes for problems like stress — “If I buy this scented candle, I can banish stress from my life” or “Once I'm rich, I'll have no stress” — but it doesn't work like that. It's a constant battle. If I've learned anything from my four decades on the planet, however, it's that we *can* reduce stress in our lives through the magic of mindfulness.

Be Here Now

Mindfulness is a simple concept that can be difficult to grasp. It's the process of being fully in the moment; listening to what's around you, noticing the world as it is, without judgment or opinion. Paying attention to yourself and letting the experience of the present be the only reality in your head.

As the saying goes: Be here now.

This is so obvious and basic that many people dismiss it as idiotic babbling. But there's a huge difference between understanding a concept and practicing it on a regular basis. As David Foster Wallace reminds us in his 2005 commencement address to Kenyon College: "The most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about."

Wallace mentions mindfulness directly in that address:

Probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education — at least in my own case — is that it enables my tendency to over-intellectualize stuff, to get lost in abstract argument inside my head, instead of simply paying attention to what is going on right in front of me, paying attention to what is going on inside me. As I'm sure you guys know by now, it is extremely difficult to stay alert and attentive, instead of getting hypnotized by the constant monologue inside your own head.

This is mindfulness: The art and practice of paying attention to what is going on in front of you, and inside of you.

Learning how to be alert and attentive, and letting go of the constant monologue.

I use the word “practice” because it’s a process that takes time to absorb. At first you may feel silly or self-conscious when you step into a moment of mindfulness (especially in public). But with time you will be able to let go of those feelings, since they’re just part of “the constant monologue inside your own head”. They’re part of the problem. They’re a manifestation of the ego, since very few people will ever notice — or care — when you spend a

moment being mindful. We'll get to that.

Once you figure out how to be here now, the only other step is to let everything go. Let go of your fear, your anxiety, your regret, your anticipation, your dread, your to-do list, your homework, your meeting tomorrow afternoon, your unread emails, your social media, your car's weird clicking noise. Those things aren't going anywhere, and you're not going to solve them in this instant. Just let go and be here now.

The Myth of Multitasking and the Magic of Mindfulness

We live in an age of constant multitasking. People used to think that technology would constantly make our lives easier, so that eventually we would have no stress at all. While scientific research has made our lives easier in many ways (fewer diseases, less time spent on tedious chores), many of us replace one form of stress with another. Sometimes this is voluntary, but often it is not. Automation at work, for example, makes time for more tasks from management. Many organizations use technology to increase productivity, rather than ease the burden on workers.

In the 21st century we are plugged in, switched on, and

linked up to the point where nothing is itself any longer. All things are necessarily tiny bits of other things, reassembled to feed breakneck whim of the myriad users. We surf the web while watching TV. We text while we drive. We check social media while talking to friends. In an old story from Japan, a teacher says: “Look at this man eating while reading a book. Does he not enjoy either of these activities enough to do it by itself?”

The truth of multitasking is that it is occasionally necessary and sometimes pleasurable. I often watch TV while I eat, because it’s a good way to be entertained while I am nourished. Right at this moment I am writing this sentence while supervising a Creative Writing class that is working on a small-group project.

The myth of multitasking is the lie we tell ourselves about how effective we can be. I cannot concentrate on these words I am writing as well as I might, if I waited until my room were silent. Fortunately, my students (juniors and seniors in high school) are diligent and able to keep themselves on task. I’ve given them a fun assignment to

work on, so there's no need for me to watch their every move.)

We cannot do two things at 100% efficiency. Instead, we do one thing at 40% and the other at 60%. Or we do one thing at 20% and one at 80%. Television is especially demanding, so we shouldn't do important work while it's on. Driving a car deserves 100% of our attention at all times, because one brief moment of distraction can easily cause injury or death. My father worked around car crashes, and showed me lots of horrible photos of what happens when people drive without paying attention. And this was before everyone had cell phones.

Mindfulness is the art of simply being here now. Wherever you are right now — in a classroom, or at home on the couch, or inside a prison cell, or at a desk at work, or wherever — just take a moment and be where you are, when you are. Breathe in and breathe out. Inspire, expire. Let go of your thoughts and focus on your breath. Take stock of your mental and physical states, and then return to your breath. Let the past be in the past, and let the future arrive

when it will. Let your thoughts float away. Just take a moment and be here now.

The magic of mindfulness is that we can do it anytime we want (well, almost), and it can help us deal with many things: stress, tension, worry, fear, anxiety, depression. You may have experienced pain in the past, and you may experience more in the future. But in *this* moment, are you being injured by someone else? Are you being stung by bees, or attacked by terrorists? No. So just be here now and enjoy the sensation of being safe and calm and quiet.

The magic of mindfulness is realizing that life is nothing but a series of “right now” moments. The more you can appreciate the joy and peace of being here now, enjoying the safe, calm, quiet moments, the more peace you will feel. This is hard to see when we begin a practice of mindfulness, because the pain and trauma of the past — along with the worry and fear of the future — come rushing in as soon as the noise dies down. But it’s a feedback loop. The more you let go of that pain and trauma and worry and fear, the easier the process will become.

This is not a guarantee, of course; some people have negative experiences when they give mindfulness a try. Some folks who have experienced severe trauma can go through new trauma in moments of mindfulness, and require professional help to overcome it. As always, be aware of your own experiences and tendencies, and never be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

The magic of mindfulness is that it's free and simple. (Beware of anyone trying to profit from mindfulness.) All you need is a safe, quiet place. You can use incense and candles and music and timers and *zafus* and *zabutons* and special bells if you want, but all you really need is a safe, quiet place. You can be mindful almost anywhere and for as long as you like. You can be mindful while sitting in full lotus position, or in a chair, or lying down (be careful not to fall asleep), or walking through a hallway, or during a shower, or driving a car — or riding a bike — or standing on a street corner. One nurse educator recommends mindful handwashing as a way to be present for patients. You can even be mindful while playing video games, as I'll discuss

later.

Mindfulness goes by many names, but they all come back to the same thing: Be here now. Some people call it meditation, but it's easy to get hung up on what that image brings to mind: People on a mountain, chanting mantras. (You can chant a mantra if you want, but it's not required. Same with sitting on top of a mountain.) Some people achieve mindfulness through yoga; if that suits you, fine. Do it. Same with *tai chi*. Some people have all sorts of rules about how you're supposed to sit while meditating, and which palm should go on top when you fold your hands, but in my view that's all window dressing. Try different things and do what works.

People who practice rigid, formalistic meditation methods may react with horror or fury when I say there's no one correct way to achieve mindfulness. I have been lambasted at times for refusing to obey this or that set of rules. But as Emerson said: "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." (I reckon he'd be okay with replacing "man" with "woman"; or "human", if you want to bypass

gender.) As dead prez said in the title of their 2012 song, there is “No Way As The Way”. I’m not a fan of dogma or orthodoxy in general, and if you don’t know what’s going on in my mind, how can you tell me how to cleanse it?

The magic of mindfulness is that it’s adaptive and dynamic. Whatever you’re doing, simply do that one thing. Chop wood and carry water, as they say. When you’re brushing your teeth, just brush your teeth. Feel the bristles against the enamel. Hear the sound of the scrubbing. Taste the paste. Breathe in, breathe out. You can be mindful for thirty seconds or four hours. All you need is a safe, quiet place.

The Bell of Mindfulness: A Mental Speed Bump

Making time to be mindful is great, but it's also helpful to spend thirty random seconds being mindful during our daily routines. Sometimes the most important time to be mindful is when we're not planning it. That's where the bell of mindfulness comes in. It's an ancient technique of focusing solely on the sound of the bell and the sensation of breathing.

You can get a bell and ring it yourself, but a bell of mindfulness is most helpful when it arrives unexpectedly. This is a benefit of meditating with other people, but you can also find websites that will ring a bell at random (or regular) intervals. There are also mobile device apps that will ring bells; some are free, and some cost money because they have

fancy ... well, bells and whistles. If you can get others on board, ring a bell at random times during a meeting. Have everyone stop and take three breaths. (Leave at least 15 minutes between bells.)

Another technique is to use a different sound as a bell of mindfulness. You might use the sound of a car horn as your bell; when you hear any car honk its horn, take thirty seconds to be here now. You could use the sound of sneezing, or a school bell (for my students and teacher friends), or any other sound you hear.

The bell of mindfulness need not be an actual sound, either. The important part is recognizing the need to be mindful. When you realize you're slouched in a chair, hear the bell and sit up straight. When you feel overwhelmed by all the things on your to-do list, hear the bell and close your eyes. Take three breaths and be here now. Learn to recognize the signs of stress and hear the bell in those moments.

The bell of mindfulness is like a mental speed bump, but it applies to your physical motion too. If you find

yourself walking quickly, hear the bell and slow down. (Stop, if you can.) Take three deep breaths and be here now. If you're gobbling a meal, hear the bell and slow your chewing. (I once heard someone recommend chewing every mouthful of food thirty times. That's a bit much for me, but once you pay attention, you'll realize how quickly you scarf up your meals. Even chewing five times can help.) Take three breaths between each bite. Eating slowly helps us be here now and enjoy the food. Eating quickly leads to indigestion and discomfort, both physical and mental.

Slowing down is especially important in the 21st century, when life seems more hectic than ever. James Gleick's 1999 book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* thoroughly documents this trend, and how it affects us. We are pressured to move more quickly, drive more quickly, speak more quickly, react more quickly, shop more quickly, and live more quickly.

Chances are, no one will encourage you to slow down. Therefore you must do it yourself. Drive at the speed limit; if people need to pass you, let them pass. Slowing down can

help you enjoy each moment more, since you'll be hurrying through it less.

Five Times to De-Stress Every Day

1. As soon as you wake up, take three deep breaths. Spend a minute appreciating the moment before moving into the day itself.
2. Before every meal, take three deep breaths and give thanks for the food.
3. When you leave the house for the first time, take a deep breath.
4. When you wash your hands, instead of shaking the water off your hands, hold them vertically and let the water drip away. Breathe deeply once or twice.
5. Before going to sleep, take three deep breaths.

MindWipe: Deep Cleaning

Remember, there is no one correct way to wipe your mind. I have tried various methods, and I've settled on two: sitting meditation and a guided relaxation practice.

I use a form of sitting meditation in which I stare at the wall and count my breaths. Some people follow formalistic strictures about how to sit, while others use mind-puzzles to unlock enlightenment. Me, I just sit still and count my breaths for 20 minutes. (If you're just starting, try five or ten minutes.) I listen to the sound of the fan in the summer and the heater in the winter. I listen to birds or cars passing by. Sometimes I light incense, sometimes I don't.

I also use a guided relaxation exercise from time to time. It helps when I can't fall asleep, or when I'm physically stressed. Sometimes it helps to alleviate headaches or other

pains of anxiety. I wrote and recorded it myself, then added some quiet music. It's available for free at www.fbesp.org/mindwipe if you'd like to have a listen.

I use both of these techniques because they offer targeted relief for mental stress (sitting meditation) and physical stress (guided relaxation). Sometimes I'll do one after the other. Some people engage in hours of meditation — some hardcore retreats consist of meditation all day every day for an entire weekend — but I rarely go for more than 30 minutes at a time.

Everything in moderation, as they say, including moderation.

Why I Wrote This Thing: Anxiety, Depression, Body and Mind

The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh is the poster child for tranquility and mindfulness. When Oprah Winfrey met him for the first time in 2010, she said: “Just being in your presence, I feel less stressed than when the day started.”

I’m not that guy. People who know me know that I am energetic, passionate, and bombastic. I speak with gusto and volume, and I love to argue. Most of this is a result of my teaching style. In order to shake young people out of their comatose doldrums, I work hard to infect them with my love for life, my passion for writing, and my desire to change the

world. I won't deny that I'm a loud person, so I'm not surprised if some people are skeptical when I offer suggestions on how to deal with stress or achieve mental clarity.

I am, however, a joyful boy (to paraphrase Ani DiFranco) and I am, at my core, a calm person. I believe too many people get upset at the wrong things at the wrong times, and I work hard to keep everything in perspective. I am angry about injustice and oppression, but I have learned how to be “angry for a long time” (as I will discuss in a later section). Besides, I suspect if Thich Nhat Hanh had my job, he'd be yelling and bouncing around the room too. If he has some other suggestion for how to get students to look up from their cell phones, I'm all ears.

Teaching is a very stressful job, and the fact that I've survived for over 15 years — using a classroom style that is engaging and energetic — shows that I've learned a thing or two about dealing with stress. I've never had formal training in meditation or mindfulness, but I've helped lots of people find ways to de-stress and I live to teach everything I've

learned, inside the classroom and out.

I also know a thing or two about the anxiety epidemic that plagues young people these days. When I was 13 years old, I was badly beaten at a concert, which left me with serious emotional and mental scars alongside the physical wounds. I was scared to go to school for a while, and endured panic attacks for years. My mother shared a relaxation recording that was helpful, and this was an important way for me to overcome my trauma. I didn't learn about the concept of mindfulness until much later, but I discovered certain forms of it through my love of art and literature.

I've never suffered from clinical depression, but I've had rough times in my life. I was supported by people who helped me cope mentally, emotionally, and psychically. Now I want to help others who might be going through difficult times. As I tell my students, writing is a path to many kinds of liberation, so I encourage anyone reading these words to write about their problems in addition to giving mindfulness a shot.

This book is as much a reminder to myself as it is a guide for others. In the *mesbugas* of teaching and living, it's easy for anyone — myself included — to forget the importance of simple breathing and being here now. I want to keep these ideas handy so that Future Me can remember their value.

A Bell

Take three deep breaths.

Do it right now, before you do anything else.

Let Go of Your Anger

Everyone gets angry; it is inevitable. The secret is not to avoid being angry, because you will inevitably fail, and then you'll get angry at yourself for failing.

Instead, learn how to let go of your anger. This is more difficult than it sounds, because anger is a natural part of life, and it is usually accompanied by feelings of self-righteousness. ("That guy cut me off! I deserve to get where I'm going quickly.") To make matters worse, moments of anger are usually compounded by social pressures ("A real man stands up for himself!") and/or fears about self-worth. ("I can't let people push me around all the time!") Sometimes we get mad at ourselves, instead of lashing out at others.

The worst thing you can do with anger is ignore it. The

second-worst thing you can do is cling to it. Many people ignore their anger, where it builds up and festers beneath the surface, until it explodes at the wrong moment and suddenly they're screaming at people they care about because of something insignificant like ice cube trays. If the anger is directed inward, they may do self-destructive things. This is why it's necessary to recognize anger when it arrives, and then let go of it.

Letting go of anger is tough, because we tend to do the opposite and cling to it. Anger can feed the ego and give us a sense of indignant pride. It can even be comforting at times. While some anger can be healthy if it's properly managed (see the next section), clinging to anger leads to hate and fear and the rest of it. Over time anger can corrode our natural empathy and lead us to make foolish or hurtful decisions, usually in unconscious ways.

In her 1986 memoir *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou writes: "I always knew that fury was my natural enemy. It clotted my blood and clogged my pores. It literally blinded me so that I lost my peripheral

vision." A healthy mind needs clear vision and healthy pores, so releasing anger is a must.

I wish I had some foolproof method for releasing anger, but I can no more instruct you on releasing anger than I can teach you how to let go of a pencil. Just relax your hand and the pencil will fall away. And like other mental states, anger works with feedback — the more anger you cling to, the more angry you will get when some new problem comes along. Let go of your anger now, and it will be easier to let go of it the next time a problem arrives.

How to Be Angry for a Long Time: The Personal Political

Not all anger is corrosive. I don't believe Maya Angelou is being careless in that line from 1986 when she uses the word "fury" over "anger". I believe Dr. Angelou understood the positive power anger can have. In her 1981 essay "The Uses of Anger", Audre Lorde wrote: "Anger is loaded with information and energy." It is not necessary for us to cling to our anger in order to absorb this information and energy. But letting go of our anger before we learn from it (or take energy from it) can also be unhealthy.

In a world smothered by oppression and injustice, there are reasons around every corner to get angry. As the saying

goes: If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. Terrorism, state violence, neglect, child abuse, police brutality, gang violence, white supremacy, gender-based violence, grinding poverty, hunger in a world of plenty — the list goes on and on. Sister Souljah once recorded a song with the powerful refrain: "Why aren't you angry?"

I often feel the same way. How can people know about all the horrible problems in our world and still be so happy? One answer, of course, is that many people don't know about these things. Most people don't know about the massacres in Indonesia and East Timor. Most people don't know about the innocent civilians killed by US drone strikes. Most people don't know about police officers who die on the job. Most people don't know about unarmed people (often black and brown people) killed by police officers. Until camera phones became ubiquitous, it was difficult to raise awareness — or media attention — about such cases.

Worst of all, some people are willfully ignorant about these problems. We have easier access to news and

information than humans have ever had before. So couldn't we all learn about our world if we wanted to? The truth is that many people *choose* to remain ignorant. Like all choices, this does not happen in a vacuum, and hearing an angry lecture about the evils of ignorance doesn't usually get people to pay attention to the news. As a professional educator, I am quite familiar with the rage that comes from confronting willful ignorance.

Even when we learn about injustice, it's common for us to distance ourselves with abstraction and hyper-intellectual analysis. We often refuse to engage with these problems on a human level. If a problem is close to me, hearing someone insist on emotional distance and sterile discourse can be frustrating.

So anger at injustice is a natural response; it is also proper. In certain doses, it can be healthy. Anger can drive us forward and motivate us to take action. At a Harlem rally for Fannie Lou Hamer in 1964, Malcolm X said: "Usually, when people are sad, they don't do anything. They just cry over their condition. But when they get angry, they bring

about a change.”

Lots of people — especially those who care for others and wish to fight against injustice — succumb to depression and despair. Sometimes they turn to drugs or alcohol to numb the pain. I would rather see people get angry than depressed. Anger can motivate, while depression drains us of motivation. Of course, it’s not usually a conscious decision. Still, recognizing the value of anger can forestall feelings of sadness or depression.

I have been involved for decades in various struggles for change: police brutality, gendered violence, LGBTQ rights, international economics, third-world solidarity, education reform, labor rights, anti-war, and dozens of others. I’ve tabled at events for hours without getting a single signature. I’ve tried to put leaflets into the hands of disinterested consumers, unwilling to care about slave wages in the factories that create the stuff they buy. I’ve marched and chanted and blocked traffic and shouted and lobbied and organized and made phone calls and sat in meeting after meeting after meeting.

This stuff can drain you.

It's absolutely essential for people (especially young people) who fight the power to learn how to be angry for a long time. Otherwise the rage and fury will clot your blood and clog your pores. No one will protect you from the exhaustion and emotional toll these struggles will take; you must protect yourself. And in my experience, bitterness and bile are supreme enemies against which you must be vigilant. Nothing will make you burn out more quickly than succumbing to the belief that there's no point.

If you want to take action — real, meaningful action — against injustice and violence, you need to be prepared to run marathons, not windsprints. In a 2004 piece entitled “My Last Talk with Gary Webb”, Richard Thieme wrote:

The passion for truth and justice is not a sprint. It's a long-distance run that requires a different kind of training, a different degree of commitment. Our eye must be on a goal that we know we will never reach in our lifetimes. Faith is the name of believing in the transcendent, often despite all evidence to the contrary.

I want more people in the streets with us, demanding justice.

I want young people to get woke and speak out and fight

back. But I want long-distance runners, not short-distance sprinters. I want soldiers in the fight who can nurture themselves and avoid burnout.

Resistance culture is a street soldier's best friend. Music from Public Enemy and Lowkey and Ana Tijoux and Rage Against the Machine and The Indigo Girls help the scars of injustice sting a little less. Writing from bell hooks and Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us that we're not alone. Poetry from Maya Angelou and Saul Williams and Audre Lorde gives us the power to keep our heads up.

Movements for change last when they can provide alternative ways of thinking and nurture investments of time and energy. We have a responsibility to ourselves and each other to stay angry in a way that is conscious and sustainable.

The Little Hater and The Swollen Head: Confronting the Ego

The ego is the enemy of excellence. No enemy we face on the mental, social, intellectual, emotional, or political battlefields will cause us more problems. In 1966, Alan Watts wrote in *The Book*:

Our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing. [...] The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego.

The ego is that voice in the head that says we are perfect, magnificent, beyond reproach. It will flatter us with

congratulations and celebration until we're convinced that we have no space left to improve or advance.

But the ego is also the “Little Hater” that Jay Smooth from **illdoctrine.com** speaks about. The ego is the voice of negativity which claims we're worthless, despicable, and unlovable. In both cases, it is a voice of isolation and uniqueness. The ego convinces us that the only person we can trust is not ourselves, but it. The ego must be fed through narcissistic self-absorption, whether for positive or negative ends. And it is never satisfied. (Guy Ritchie's 2005 film *Revolver* confronts the problem of ego in a powerful — if flawed — way, and the Lifesavas 2003 track “HelloHiHey” is the best song ever made about it.)

The ego wants you all to itself. Sharing yourself with others will drive it crazy. This is one reason why romantic relationships are so hard — they require us to get closer to other people than we usually allow. Healthy relationships require us to wrestle with our egos. Sacrifice, sympathy, solidarity; these things are poison to the ego. And the more you identify with your ego, the more despicable these things

will feel.

The beauty is that it also works the other way. When you're courageous enough to sacrifice for other people, you realize that your ego matters less. When you understand what other people are going through, you can recognize the commonality of suffering, and you realize that you don't need pity or special treatment. When you work with others, you find twice the strength you would get from trying to deal with everything on your own.

The ego deals in both self-aggrandizement and self-worthlessness. These are two sides of the same coin. When everything is all about *you*, it doesn't matter if it's for positive or negative reasons. Of course it feels good when the pompous positive ego is running wild, but it can do just as much damage as the destructive negative ego.

Most people have a complicated relationship with the ego, because it's hard to thrive without confidence. The ego can be a voice of support and self-satisfaction that makes it possible to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Those of us who endured years — usually teenage

years — of awkwardness and anxiety have a uniquely complicated relationship with our egos. Who else could we talk to, late into the night? No one else understood what we were going through, and no one else offered us strategies for self-preservation.

In my case, the main strategy during that difficult time was: Feed the ego. You're better than them, you're awesome, it's their loss. Like some weird bloated life preserver, inflating my ego allowed me to float on the sea of social indifference (or hostility, on less pleasant days) into the gulf of oblivion. I could escape into my own head, where my ego was waiting with fantasy novels and hot chocolate, promising me that everything was going to be okay so long as we looked out for each other.

Eventually, my ego demanded payback. Once I found people who wanted to spend time with me, my ego insisted that this was a fool's errand. Something would go wrong, I thought. They would reveal their true colors soon enough. This sometimes led to a horrible feedback loop, wherein I sabotaged my own happiness with a conviction that it would

never have worked in the first place. When everything fell apart, my ego was there in the rubble, waiting, stroking its cat, giving me a look of “told you so”.

Creative people also have unique complications in their ego-interactions. We get caught up in feelings of supreme pride one minute, and feelings of total inventive worthlessness the next. When we produce good work, we stand justifiably satisfied with the fruits of our labors. This is good and necessary. That satisfaction can instantly become contempt for others, though, especially if we feel the world doesn't appreciate our genius. This problem tormented the 19th century French novelist Honoré de Balzac.

On the other side of the coin, the hostile ego of the creative person can convince us that our work is never good enough. Working for years on a single project is the least of our concerns here. At its worst, the hostile ego can convince us not to pick up the pen or paintbrush in the first place.

Working in bookstores for many years caused my ego to rage in both ways at once. Watching people buy all those magnificent and mediocre books convinced me that [A] I

could never write stuff that good; [B] People don't want quality books — I mean, look at what they're *buying*; and [C] No one will ever notice anything I write, regardless of its quality. Trying to get published by professionals in recent years has not disabused me of these notions.

The equanimity of ideal mindfulness is at war with the creative ego. If I am perfectly detached from cravings of fame, attention, and recognition, then why bother trying to publish my work at all? (It's easy for Thich Nhat Hanh to preach about these virtues when he has the whole community of Plum Village waiting to print and distribute every word he says!) A balance must be struck, but if you're hoping for advice on how to strike it, you've come to the wrong place.

The third wrinkle in my trifecta of ego complication is my job as a teacher. I have trained for years in curriculum design, pedagogical theory, classroom management, and standards implementation. I am licensed by the government to educate the next generation. I have studied my craft for decades, and worked tirelessly to become a resource of

knowledge, insight, and erudition.

Still, when I get in front of a classroom, my ego says: “Who the heck are you to order these kids into silence? What gives you the right to overshadow their cell phones and daydreams?” So many teachers ride their ego trips into meaningless power struggles with students, and I’ve committed myself to the exact opposite. Ironically, this gives me a sense of egoistic pride about how superior my classes are.

So my triple ego variety pack (social, creative, educational) fills my head with many curious voices — some celebratory, some sanguine, some cynical. Sometimes the positive and negative cancel each other out, while at other times good meets good and I’m soaring on wings of my own greatness. Once in a while everything turns to putrescence and I’m dragged downward by weights of misery. Fortunately this is rare.

Behind all of it, though, lies my real self, which has only a tangential relationship to the mask of ego. While reading Alan Watts, I always ask myself: “Okay, so if the ego

is not the true self, then what is?" And, like Theodore in the 2013 movie *Her*, I'm left feeling utterly baffled by the hints left in the sand. The closest Mr. Watts comes (again, in *The Book*) is this:

We do not "come into" this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. This fact is rarely, if ever, experienced by most individuals. Even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it, but continue to be aware of themselves as isolated "egos" inside bags of skin.

Appreciating this "universal truth" is difficult enough, but finding ways to live like it's real is something else altogether. How does a leaf stop thinking it's better or worse or special or unique among all the leaves of the tree?

This is where mindfulness can save your life. Once we learn to exist in silent stillness, we can let go of our egos — both the positive and the negative — and remind ourselves of our connectivity and integration with all things. It's not quick, and it's not easy, and it's not always pleasant. But it's a powerful step in moving beyond selfishness and self-pity.

The ego is a more complex monster than I can really help you with. It's a being of malice and hedonism, made of movie cameras and flamethrowers. After four decades of war with my ego, I can offer neither easy answers nor sure-fire solutions. But I can say this, with absolute certainty: That voice in your head promising you that you don't have an ego problem? That's your ego.

A Bell

Take three deep breaths.

Do it right now, before you do anything else.

The Challenge of Mindful Video Gaming

In some ways, the idea of playing video games mindfully is absurd. How can you be here now when you're deliberately escaping into a virtual world? I'll admit that it's not possible to be fully mindful in the same way as you can by sitting and staring at the wall. But if it's possible to be mindful while driving or walking — literally moving from one place to another — then surely it's possible to achieve a kind of mindfulness while wandering through *Skyrim* or driving in *Grand Theft Auto V*.

My favorite example of a video game with mindfulness potential is *Minecraft*. (Maybe I should start calling it "*Mindcraft*"?) If the saying "Chop wood, carry water" encapsulates the ideology of mindfulness through

concentration on small tasks, then maybe some lesser form of mindfulness can also be gained by chopping virtual wood and carrying virtual water. There are monsters in *Minecraft*, but you can turn them off. It's possible to play that game in a way that simplifies it into mining coal, digging dirt, chopping wood, harvesting crops, and building towers.

When I play *Minecraft* in this way, I am able to breathe deeply and sink into the moment. Sure, I'm hearing both the actual birds outside my window and the virtual water beside my virtual house. But in that moment I can release my stress and appreciate what is going on around me and inside me.

This is the key to mindful video gaming: Being aware of your reality at each moment, and recognizing the difference between reality and virtuality. It's fine to escape into a game — and the best video games have much to offer in terms of escape: power, victory, control, influence, music, explosions, excitement. But the escape should be temporary. The game is not your friend. (It might help you *find* friends, as video games have helped me find the crew at **vghub.net**). The game is not more important than the people you love.

With the advent of virtual reality headsets (which I hope will be a passing fad, like Nintendo's Robotic Operating Buddy and Microsoft's Kinect Camera), we're seeing the potential for a new level of immersion and escapism. This worries me, because I know how common it is for people to ignore the actual world when technology wraps around us. I'm trying to resist this. My wife and I share a flip-style cell phone. I own an iPod touch, but I try to leave it in a pocket when I'm with other people. Eventually it gets easier and easier to bypass the real world, until we're living in vats of goo with electric spikes plugged into our necks like *The Matrix*.

I try to put the games on pause for more important things, like when my wife comes home from work. It's just a game. In his 2000 book *On Writing*, Stephen King said that writers should put their desks in a corner. "Life is not a support system for art," he notes. "It's the other way around." The same is true for video games.

Here are three rules of thumb for playing video games in a mindful, conscious way.

1. Be aware of your emotional state while gaming.

Adjust accordingly. When I play the racing/soccer/football hybrid *Rocket League*, my shoulders get tense and I gnash my teeth. If I pause after someone scores, I can realize what's happening inside me. Then I can relax my shoulders, take a breath, drink some water, and get back into the fight.

When you get mad at a game, recognize that your anger is connected to the game. Don't take it out on other people, and don't ignore it. Don't confuse the thrill of victory with the evaporation of anger. It's easy for these to blend together. If your anger from a game carries over to other parts of your life, stay away from that game for a while.

If you're tired, don't play a game that requires intense concentration or force of will. Play something more laid-back. If you're feeling frustrated with something in your life, play a game that provides certain satisfaction. I play lots of *Skyrim*, in part because I don't have to master arcane combinations of combat controls. I can just swing my sword and defeat the draugr and enjoy the scenery. *NightSky* is another game that can actually be relaxing.

2. Stop while you're feeling good. I learned this while playing *Super Meat Boy*, well-known for its intense difficulty: After you play for a while and you beat a level, stop. Take a break and play something else, or go for a walk, or read a book, or do homework. If you keep trying to beat a level and fail, then try again, and fail, and try again, and fail, you will get more and more frustrated until you want to grab a nuclear bomb and destroy all creation. (Serious gamers will know what I'm talking about.) You'll punch the wall or hurl your controller through the window. Your emotions *will* get the better of you. Plus, if you ragequit after such a session, you will associate that game with the frustration. When you look at it, you're likely to think: "I hate that game. It's pure agony."

On the other hand, if you quit after you *overcome* a tough level, you'll associate the game with joy and victory. When you look at it, you're likely to think: "I had fun the last time I played that. I shall now defeat another level and feel good again." This is especially important when you're playing games before spending time with other people. No

one wants to absorb the nasty emotional residue of your angry unsuccessful gaming session.

The same is true of sports games or puzzle games. After you win a few rounds of *Rocket League* or finish a tough level in *Mushroom 11*, stop. Enjoy the thrill of victory and do something else. Trust me, you'll enjoy your games more.

3. Take breaks and be healthy. Video games can be hazardous to your health. The *Journal of Medical Case Reports* calls it “gamer’s thrombosis”, in which blood clots (specifically “deep vein thrombosis”, or DVT) form in the legs of people who play games for too long without moving. In 2004 the *Yonsei Medical Journal* reported on a man who died from DVT after playing an online game for 80 hours. In 2013 a 20-year-old woman in China nearly died after developing DVT from a 20-hour gaming session. A man from New Zealand was hospitalized in the same year with DVT after playing video games in bed for eight hours a day for four days. Don’t end up like these people, kids! Drink water and take a break every hour.

This is not unique to video games — DVT is most

common among air travelers. It can strike when we work too long at a computer, or spend hours sitting around watching television. But as the *JMCR* notes: “The average time spent playing video games is increasing. Prolonged immobility associated with gaming may therefore be an important risk factor for venous thromboembolism.”

More to the point of this book, however, is the threat of what we might call Mental Thrombosis. The *JMCR* goes on to say:

Previous research has shown an increase in blood pressure and heart rate with exposure to violent video games as part of the physiological stress response, suggesting an association between acute psychological stress and a hypercoagulable state. The prolonged period of mental stress associated with video gaming could further increase the risk of venous thrombosis in the setting of seated immobility.

Mindful gaming and taking regular breaks can help you recognize your body’s “stress response” to gaming and deal with the “mental stress associated with video gaming”. Ignore these warnings at your peril.

It’s not hard to find people who fail to keep video

games in perspective. You can hear them yelling on Xbox Live or talking smack in *Call of Duty*. They scream at their girlfriends and insult everyone else in the game, usually with vulgar language and racist attacks. Sometimes I worry that the game really *is* the most important thing in that person's life, which is unbearably sad. You don't want to be like that guy, do you?

I've been addicted to video games all my life, and they are important to me. But they're still games, and they should be fun.

Some professionals play video games for a living, and others earn money from their video-game-related YouTube channels or podcasts. Those things are fine, but once money is connected to something it becomes difficult to keep it in perspective. When you have to win in order to pay the rent, then your anger isn't just a minor irritation. Stepping away from the game is no longer an option. I've seen enough interviews with professional gamers to know that after a certain point, they're not having fun.

I find this sad. In the movie *Rounders*, Mikey tells Worm

that their friend Knish hasn't had to work in years, since he makes a steady living from playing poker. Worm shoots back: "You don't call that work, what he does?" These are words that every video game enthusiast could stand to remember, when hearing about pros who win tournaments and collect massive paychecks.

However you play video games, and whichever games you play, be mindful when you play. You'll have more fun, and strike a better balance between real life and your virtual lives.

A Word to My Teacher Friends

As someone who has been teaching for a decade and a half, I know how stressful our profession can be. Lesson plans, emails, papers to grade, hallway duties, committee and faculty meetings, copies to make, extracurricular activities, parent conferences and calls, scheduling conflicts, tutoring sessions, meetings for IEP/504/ELL plans, curriculum design and redesign, technology integration — and this is all *before* the students arrive! When class itself starts, we have a new boatload of stress and tension heaped onto our plates. (For an excellent discussion of the ever-expanding list of obligations loaded onto educators in the US, read Jamie Vollmer's 2010 book *Schools Cannot Do it Alone.*)

Being a teacher means you are never free from the enormous list of things you have to get done before you can make a to-do list for all the other things you have to get done. Every teacher knows that feeling — it would be so helpful to make a to-do list, but you can't afford that luxury before you make those copies for third hour.

Mindfulness is being introduced to many schools across the country and around the world, which is good. It can help students with anger management and focus in their lives. But it's also important for educators to practice mindfulness. Not only for our own health and well-being, but because being mentally prepared is essential if we wish to give the students our best. Setting aside even three minutes each day for a quick dip into the pool of mindfulness can help you deal with the chaos in your classroom.

This is *not* a substitute for demanding smaller classes or democratic control over our workplaces, which would cause less stress to begin with. Fortunately, we don't have to choose between being mentally healthy and fighting for more humane workplaces.

The US public school is a particularly rapid-fire institution; the school in which I teach certainly is. As a result, teachers are constantly urged to be more efficient, more thorough, more speedy. We need to consult with every student every day. We need to communicate with parents. While in the building, our lives are regimented down to the exact second each bell rings. We get precisely 24 minutes for lunch, during which time we must also make copies and send emails and file papers. The school will never urge us to slow down.

Therefore we must slow ourselves down.

You must think clearly when you teach, and doing so requires regular wiping of the mind. The stress from first hour can easily — and often will, automatically — encrust your mind, clouding your ability to work with second hour. Add more stress during second hour, and third hour can be even more difficult. No wonder so many teachers find themselves overwhelmed during prep hours, but there's no time to rest; we've got more copies to make and papers to grade and emails to send and packets to file. Many teachers

feel as though taking time for themselves during the school day is heresy. We're here for the kids, right? So isn't it selfish to spend time releasing the stress that weighs on us?

This is another trap of the ego. The ego says nothing is more important than the work we're always doing, and everything will fall apart the moment we step away from the desk. We're so very important, and doing as many things as possible every minute of every day is good for us — and good for the kids, right? Don't fall for this trap. Taming the ego can make us less overwhelmed, which can make us better teachers.

Of course it's also a trap of the ego to say that we're more important than the students. Lazy teachers are driven by various ego trips about how they can teach just fine without working hard at all. But after a decade and a half in the classroom, I can say with absolute conviction that the biggest problem facing teachers in the US right now is not laziness, but rather compulsive overwork and lack of self-care. This is as much a reminder to myself as it is a warning to others.

You are not doing anyone favors — not your students, not your family, not yourself — when you push yourself too hard or refuse to take time to de-stress. Martyrs make for mediocre teachers, and we have to take care of ourselves.

No one else is going to do it.

A Note to Those Who Hurt Themselves

I've worked with many people over the years who inflict different kinds of self-harm: drug abuse, excessive alcohol use, suicide attempts, and various forms of cutting. Such activities are manifestations of serious illness, and must be treated by trained professionals. If you do any of these things — or know someone who does — please get professional help. I am *not* trained in fields of psychoanalysis or mental health treatment.

I have, however, had powerful experiences with folks dealing with such problems. In the unlikely event anyone reading these words is dealing with notions of self-harm — or cares for someone in such a position — I'd like to make a few points.

First of all, please recognize that your illness is a medical condition no different from appendicitis or a torn ACL. Many people act as though illness of the mind comes from dumb choices or moral failure. But consider this: When someone breaks a bone, we show compassion and understanding. We empathize with their pain and offer our support. If you're wrestling with mental illness, you deserve the same.

Many people believe that other people should be able to think as they do. But I don't know what kind of chaos is going on in your head, just as you don't know what's going on in mine. Therefore we must refrain from snap judgments — best to avoid all judgments, if possible — and instead show loving-kindness toward other people.

This is especially urgent in matters of mental health, because of what's called the "shame spiral". When people use negativity and judgment — perhaps in a well-meaning attempt to jolt the person out of their hurtful pattern — it often reinforces a sense of shame, which makes the person more likely to hurt themselves. Addicts and cutters often

speaking about feeling “worthless” or believe that they somehow “deserve” to suffer.

Mindfulness is not a cure-all for notions of self-harm. But I know people who have used mindful stillness as a way to cope with the anxiety and depression that leads to such behavior. Writing in a journal is also helpful for many people.

It’s important to remember that healing ourselves mentally takes time. The conflict between desire and reality can work against us in powerful ways. As tempting as it is to push ourselves to get better quickly, we have to forgive ourselves if we don’t always do the right thing in terms of our health. (I struggle with this in terms of my physical health. I don’t work out as much as I should, and I don’t always eat healthy foods.) Making small changes of habit can have a big impact. Be patient and appreciate the small moments of tranquility where you find them.

Pause for a moment right now and take three deep breaths.

As the saying goes: “This too shall pass.” Small comfort

in desperate circumstances, I know, but the truth is that things change and painful experiences can help us get stronger.

Good luck and keep your head up.

A Verse for Moments of Fear

Recently I found myself in a situation of tension and fear. I was never in any physical danger, but the intensity of the moment flooded me with adrenaline and anxiety. The biggest problem in such moments is that we may be unable to think clearly — and therefore unable to make wise decisions.

In an attempt to calm myself and regain a level head, I came up with the following verse. Each line contains a caesura (pause), which helps with recitation and recall. You could call it a chorus, or a mantra, or whatever you want. I found it helpful in that moment of distress, and perhaps it will be useful to others.

I'm scared, but I'm here.

I'm breathing. I'm alive.

I'm thankful for the people
who have helped me in the past.

I promise to help others
in the future when I can.

I'm breathing. I'm thankful.

I'm breathing. I'm alive.

Final Thoughts

As with physical exercise or dental care, the quest for mindfulness is never finished. A common trap of the ego is to believe we have “ascended” to a state where regular de-stress-ification is no longer necessary. (I speak from experience. Listen up, Future Me!)

It can be frustrating to practice mindfulness regularly, and still feel stressed or depressed. Like working out and seeing no change on the scale, it’s easy to ask: “Why bother?” But in both cases, doing the exercise can bring results over time — or at least keep us from getting worse. Mindfulness won’t magically solve your problems, but it might help you maintain a level of equilibrium to forestall a deeper crisis. A life preserver won’t conjure land out of nothing, but it can keep you afloat until you find the shore.

Many people try to hide from stress and anxiety with drugs, alcohol, gambling, television, work, or some other distraction. There's nothing wrong with taking aspirin for a headache, but if you get headaches every day, you've got to deal with the root cause. The same is true with stress and other afflictions of the mind.

Loving yourself means making time for yourself, doing things you enjoy, and doing things that are healthy — even if you don't love doing them at the time. Often when I force myself to meditate, I'm glad I chose to take time for it, even if my first choice was to play video games or waste time on social media. Usually we feel better after going to the gym, right? Don't fixate on that feeling, because attachments are unhealthy. But remember it when you're trying to decide.

A student once told me that she's inspired by my ability to stay positive and keep going, considering all the crazy stuff in my life. The irony is that I feel the same way about her. So whoever you are, and whatever you're dealing with: Keep your head up and be good to yourself.

Be here now and let go.

Gratitude

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