

911 Emergency. What Is Your Emergency and Location? My Road to Mindfulness

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My journey toward mindfulness began with a burst appendix. At the time, I didn't realize it was appendicitis. I was just relaxing after work (I'm the part-time maintenance man at the Myrtle Beach Art Museum). So, I'm watching TV, enjoying a snack and a cold beverage when I suddenly get a sharp, stabbing pain in my stomach.

"Enough already with the cold pizza," I'm thinking. A couple of hours later, the pain has not let up, but it hasn't increased either. And so to bed. But it turns out that it's tough to get into a comfortable position. I toss and turn and finally manage to get some sleep, but the next morning, the pain has increased, just moderately, mind you. Being manly and exceptionally stubborn, I choose to ignore it. Not my smartest decision, but I soldier through the day and that night.

However, by day 3, it's readily apparent that this is not indigestion. I decide that I'd better get to a walk-in clinic, but when I slide into my car, I realize that I can't drive—I'm too weak and somewhat disoriented. Fortunately, my neighbor is leaving for work just then and she takes me to the walk-in clinic. The helpful doctor there takes one look and says, "We need to get you to the nearest Emergency Room (ER) right now!"

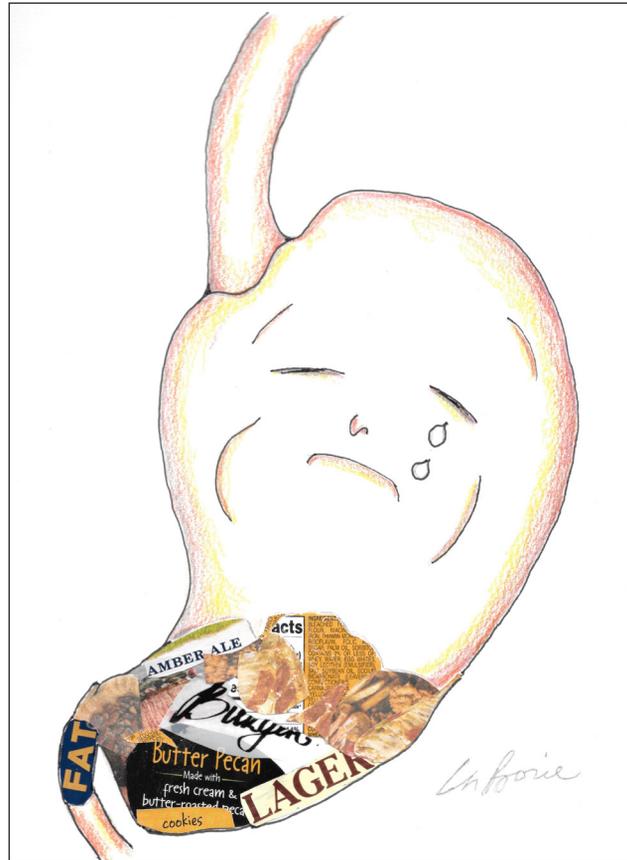
With that pronouncement, they call for an ambulance. One arrives within minutes. The EMS guys on board are very knowledgeable, thorough and reassuring, but they warn me that the ride to the hospital may be very uncomfortable. An understatement to be sure! I think my stomach felt every pothole and bump in the road. By the time I arrive at the hospital, I am in excruciating pain.

As luck would have it, there are no ER rooms available, so I end up moaning and groaning in the hall. Can't get warm, can't stand the pain, can't imagine how I'm going to get through the next minute. Then, like a *deus ex machina* in some ancient Greek drama, the surgeon on call appears. He's a tall, good-looking, muscular guy who happens to be Lithuanian. He takes one look at my stomach, gives it a poke, which nearly sends me into agony orbit and pronounces, "Busted, Da. Busted!" With that, I'm wheeled off to the OR.

The procedure is a success, but in the recovery room, I'm informed that my recovery may be somewhat painful and lengthy because my appendix had burst. "You had a close call," is how my surgeon describes it.

A month later, the pain has subsided to a certain degree, as long as I'm careful how I move around, but I've noticed that my belly button, which was always an "inzy" has become an "outzy." In fact, after 3 months have passed, it looks like half a golf ball is trying to break out of my navel. I can still push it back in without any pain, but it stubbornly returns to its "outzy" configuration shortly thereafter.

Naturally, being manly and stubborn (Did I mention that before?), I choose to ignore it for as long as possible. However, a



year later, exactly to the date of my original operation, I'm back in the surgeon's office. He tells me that I really should undergo an umbilical hernia repair and that he can handle the procedure laparoscopically. According to him, performing the operation this way will result in a shorter and less painful recovery.

If my recovery was less painful, I'd hate to see what a more painful recovery would be like. One year later, I find out.

My "outzy" navel condition has returned in spades. My surgeon tells me that might occur about 5% of the time. He proposes that this time, if I agree, he will perform the repair surgically. Again I am assured that my recovery will be less painful and shorter.

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I have to pause here to say that throughout this entire episode, I have grown to like and trust the surgeon and his staff. Although they have been entirely professional, I've established a first name "phone friend" relationship with several staff members.

That said, my recovery proves to be extremely painful and lengthy. Finally, after 3 months of diminishing pain, I feel that I'm entirely healed and am now ready to get back in the gym.

But wait. One day at work, I start to feel kind of odd. I decide to take a break and talk with my coworkers. I go into the lobby, take a seat and realize that despite having worked with the receptionist for more than 2 years, I can't remember her name. She asks me the name of the current US President. I don't know. In fact, although I know where I am, I can't remember the names of any of my fellow employees. She insists that we call 911.

Long story short, the EMS crew that arrives tells me that I may have suffered a TIA (which I learn is shorthand for a transient ischemic attack). I'm rushed to yet another hospital where I'm thoroughly tested, held overnight for observation, and then released with no apparent damage.

Two days later, I start experiencing a tightness in my chest and have difficulty breathing. I call 911. Back to the ER. All the tests for a heart attack or heart condition prove to be negative. Two days later, the symptoms return. I call 911 yet again. Another trip to the hospital. Another round of testing proves to be negative.

I consult with my regular doc. She wants me to see a cardiologist. Her physicians' assistant calls one and fortunately, the cardiologist has an opening that afternoon. I agree to the appointment and on my way into his office, I am suddenly very dizzy and experience severe tightness in my chest and neck. I'm put in a wheelchair and wheeled into one of their exam rooms where I'm once again carefully checked over.

At this point, I'm convinced that I have some sort of serious heart condition. And why not? I had rheumatic fever as a child and every other member of my family has or had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure. How could I think that I could beat the odds?

The cardio doc comes in, takes one look at the latest test results and my recent medical history and then pronounces, "You're fine, it's all in your head! I've got something I want you to do!"

With that, he rushes from the room.

My reaction is electric. I feel like a huge weight has been removed from my shoulders. Am I suddenly taller? I feel like it. It's all in my head? Just panic attacks? Eureka, I'm saved!

The doctor returns with what turns out to be a lengthy excerpt from Eckhart Tolle's remarkable best seller, *The Power of Now*. "I want you to get this book, read it, and report back to me. It's your homework. Don't argue, just do it!" he growls at me. Who knew that a cardiologist could also be a psychiatrist?

Tolle's book is packed with all kinds of useful ideas, breathing exercises, and tips about how to "Be in the moment. Be right here, right now."

Now to be completely honest, I've been aware of mindful thinking for years, and have been a rather casual follower of that practice as well. If all of this sounds like some kind of instant wrinkle removal or hair restoration remedy, it isn't. It's a whole lot harder. However, after the latest rounds of hospital and doctor visits, I've finally decided that I really do have to walk the walk instead of just talking the talk. By being in the moment, every moment that I can, I can deal with any difficulties I might encounter when they need to be encountered, not in the middle of the night or any other nonproductive time.

So, I'm on the road to mindful thinking and mindful living. Which means, in addition to mindful thought, it's adios to margaritas with rocks and salt. How about no salt at all? (Well mostly.) I've also cut down on my coffee consumption. I eat more fruits and veggies, hit the gym regularly, and practice the Buddhist edict to *think not-thinking*. I've also found that in my case, some advice from Alcoholics Anonymous is very helpful: You can't think your way into a new way of living ... you have to live your way into a new way of thinking.

Will all these mental exercises and lifestyle changes work? Well, since my latest blood pressure reading was 110 over 70, I've got a feeling they just might. ❖

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The author(s) have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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