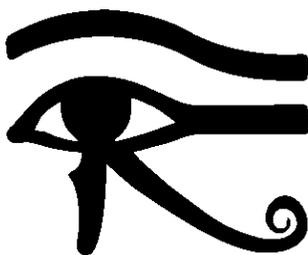


LOOK and grow
Mindful



David Rice

www.LookAndGrowMindful.com

To
Kathleen
(*aka* Catherine)
who shares my love of
light and all that it reveals

What this book is about

*The present moment is filled with joy and happiness.
If you are attentive, you will see it*

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

THERE is a very special state of mind where we savour just the present moment, where we live in the *Now*, rather than being distracted by past or future, neither of which exist, except as wisps inside our head. This joyous state is called *Mindfulness*.

The past is gone forever: whether we like it or not, all we have left are memories, nostalgia, or regrets – all in the mind. Neither does the future exist, so all we have are hopes and anxieties about it, again within our mind.

But we really do possess the *Now*. It's all we've got, and all we need. As the turtle in *Kung Fu Panda* says:

Yesterday is history; Tomorrow a mystery. But Now is a wonderful gift. Maybe that's why we call it The Present.

Mindfulness has been defined as 'an attentive awareness of the reality of things, especially in the present moment'. The reality of things?

Helen Keller once said the worst calamity that can befall us is 'to have eyes and fail to see'. We are surrounded by what we regard as 'ordinary' everyday things, like skies, trees, birds, fields, water. We take them for granted, if we notice them at all. But these things are far from ordinary. If we can learn to see them afresh, to become aware of how miraculous such things

truly are and to wonder at them, then we are beginning to touch their reality. Unfortunately we are so distracted by past and future that we rarely get time to grow aware and to wonder.

That's what this little book is about. I hope its various chapters may help us see, perhaps for the first time since childhood, what was always there, but we never perceived – the sheer splendour of this our earth – in our skies; in the sea; in our rivers and lakes; in our fields and forests; in our towns and cities; in living creatures; even in ourselves.

But especially at the edge of things – in the dawn where night meets day; in the twilight where day meets night; in the swerve of shore and bend of bay where land meet ocean; in the mountain tops where earth meets sky; in the hedgerows where field meets tree; in the spring where winter meets summer; in the autumn where summer meets winter; *in the clear night sky where we meet the Universe.*

If this book can call our attention to such things, so that the scales fall from our eyes and we become truly aware of them and intuit their reality, we may then begin to have a life filled with wonder, with joy – even with happiness, in spite of the pain and heartbreak life invariably inflicts. But it will also be a life of care for this wonderful earth and for the creatures that inhabit it – a life of Mindfulness.

There are many ways to grow mindful. One of the easiest is through just simply looking. But *really* looking, really seeing – and savouring what we see. Not just glancing and moving on. But contemplating. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, 'Perhaps the most "spiritual" thing any of us can do is simply to look through our own eyes.'

This little book then is simply about the ordinary things around us, which we can see afresh so that they are no longer ordinary; in other words, it's about the sheer Joy of Looking. If we can reach such joy it will certainly bring us to Mindfulness.

There is one final chapter quite different from the rest: it is about the urgent need to introduce the coming generation to

Mindfulness, through which it could actually renew the face of the earth.

~ *David Rice*
Killaloe
December 2013

1: Let there be sight

*Beauty is all about us, but how many are blind to it!
People take little pleasure in the natural
and quiet and simple things of life*

~ Pablo Casals

*Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth
find reserves of strength that will
endure as long as life lasts*

~ Rachel Carson

*Earth and sky, woods and fields, lakes and rivers, the mountain and
the sea, are excellent schoolmasters, and teach some of us
more than we can ever learn from books*

~ Sir John Lubbock

*Like a child standing in a beautiful park with his eyes shut tight, there's no
need to imagine trees, flowers, deer, birds, and sky; we merely need to open
our eyes and realize what is already here*

~ Bo Lozoff

IT WAS a tackle in a hectic game of rugby, and the two 13-year-olds ended up face down in the sea of mud – mud resulting from months of scrums, rucks and mauls across a once-grassy pitch.

I was the one tackling and it wasn't a particularly brilliant tackle. But, as we sucked ourselves out of the mud, wiping it from eyes, nose and mouth, I suddenly noticed how the low winter sun had turned the mud silver. *Silver*. The whole boot-

ruted expanse of mud gleamed and it was like hammered metal. It was quite astonishingly beautiful.

However I didn't realise this was beauty. I just liked what I saw. And at a rugby school in those days beauty did not come up for mention (except in regard to girls, and we never saw any of those, since this was an all-male boarding school). Besides, had I recognised it as beauty, I'd have kept my mouth shut.

Four years later, in my final spring term at that same school, we were on a route march with the school's local defense force and, as we tramped along a forest track, the command was given to halt. *At ease. Stand easy.* Down went the .303 rifles and we stretched and breathed the forest air.

I happened to look up at the canopy of beech leaves overhead, and I saw something I had never noticed before. The sunlight wasn't bouncing off the leaves, but filtering through them, so that each leaf lit up and glowed like a tiny green flame. It was as if the whole nave of trees where we stood was roofed with shimmering green fire. I have never forgotten the moment. This time I knew I was encountering beauty, and recognising it for the first time in my life.

I was experiencing the Joy of Looking, even if I didn't yet have words to express it. Indeed I was experiencing *Mindfulness* (triggered by that Joy), even though it would be many years before I ever heard the word.

I have seen that green fire many times since.

Fast forward to recent times, when I was at a writer's retreat in Devon. For some reason I don't remember, our lecturer took us down to the banks of a river that ran through a grove of trees, fresh in their green of spring. I looked up and once again saw the shimmering leaves, translucent in the sunlight.

'Isn't it amazing how those leaves glow, just like tiny flames?' I remarked to a young woman beside me.

She looked up and her eyes widened. 'Omigod, would you look!' She just gazed open-mouthed. Then she turned to me. 'You know something,' she said, 'I've never noticed that before.'

‘You will again,’ I said. ‘From now on you’ll never not notice it.’

The wonder in her eyes was a joy to see.

Failing to see

Many of us are like that young woman. Blind. Blind to the many-splendoured thing. Blind to the beauty and wonders around us. When Helen Keller, herself blind, was asked what was the worst calamity that could befall a person, her reply was, ‘To have eyes and fail to see.’

Why do we fail to see? I believe there are several reasons.

First, and above all else, it is a failure of Mindfulness. Seeing can only take place in the *Now* – which is all there really is. The past no longer exists; the future doesn’t yet exist. So if we spend all our time and energy living in the past or bothering about the future, *we are in a non-existent place*. And so we cannot see the marvels before our eyes this very moment, because we are not really here – our mind is elsewhere.

The trouble with the Now is that it keeps slithering away and becoming the past. Even the Now in which I wrote this sentence is already gone. We cannot grasp or hold it, but we *can* savour each moment as it passes, especially the wonders and beauty around us which each moment reveals. That is the Joy of Looking. And living that moment is Mindfulness.

The second reason we fail to see is that no one ever bothered to show us the miracles of the world we live in. Our parents were too busy to point them out.. Besides, they didn’t notice them themselves, because their parents didn’t point things out to them. And that was because their parents... Well, and so on. Tradition can be tricky.

The third reason we notice so little is that we are simply too busy. And if we’re too busy to look, we’re too busy. Writers down the centuries have warned us that the world is too much with us and that ‘we have given our hearts away, a sordid boon’.

The fourth reason follows on this: I call it the Eiffel-Tower Syndrome. Or you can call it the Tower-of-London Syndrome if you like. Or the Statue-of-Liberty syndrome. Have you ever met a Parisian who has been up the Eiffel Tower? Or a Londoner who has gone to the Tower to see the Crown Jewels? Or a New Yorker who has stood in the Statue of Liberty's torch? Perhaps a school trip had dragged bored kids to such places, but did they ever return as adults?

In other words, if things are there all the time, whether they be Eiffel Tower or Tower of London, or the Statue of Liberty, or the magic of the hills and dales and skies around us, we tell ourselves we have plenty of time and that we'll have a good look at them some day soon. That 'some day' mostly never comes, and mostly we die unmindful, unvisioned and unwondering.

And nowadays there is one further reason for our blindness to the beauty around us — our addiction to electronic screens, be they smart phones, tablets, notebooks, or laptops. The reign of rectangles, I call it. I have to admit these same rectangles are one of the greatest boons of our modern world – I could hardly have written this book without my computer. It's our *addiction* that is the problem – when *all* our looking goes into rectangles instead of into the world around us.

A young soldier just back from serving in the Middle East told me of his arrival at a London railway station: 'Hardly a single person was looking up or looking around them,' he said. 'Almost everyone was looking down at whatever they held in their hand. Some were poking with their finger; others were just gaping with their mouths half open.'

Pining and longing

A friend of mine had a husband who was dying of cancer. He had worked hard all his life, planned for the future, read his newspaper and watched his television. She took him for one last trip in their open-topped MG around the Ayrshire coast. At one point, looking out over the ocean towards Ailsa Craig, he

sighed and said, 'Imagine having to leave all this.' He had only noticed the beauty around him when he was about to depart it forever.

Apparently this is not unusual. According to psychologist Rollo May, 'When people are on the verge of death they think, strangely enough, about beauty. Many of these thoughts are about how beautiful is this earth that they are about to leave.' Oscar Wilde caught poignantly this awareness of beauty before death, in his poem *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, about a man waiting to be hanged:

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by. ¹

Writer and theologian Matthew Fox comments on all of this: 'How wonderful it would be if we incorporated this awareness daily into our lives before we die.' For *awareness* we can read *Mindfulness*.

When Spitfire designer Reginald J. Mitchell was dying of cancer, he received a last visit from the wife of his chief test-pilot and close friend, George Pickering. 'Don't let us talk about flying today,' Gladys suggested.

'Why should we?' Mitchell replied. 'There are more important things in the world than flying.' He gazed at his favourite flowers, all in full summer bloom. 'There is so much beauty all around us. I wish I had spent more time appreciating beauty. It is too late now, but tell George that there are more important things in life than speed. Tell him to look at the beautiful things while he has time.'²

Like those who are dying, people exiled from home often feel a longing for the loveliness of the landscapes they left behind. The fact that they are deprived of it seems to make them

acutely aware of it, perhaps for the first time. Many writers express it: 'Oh to be in England, now that April's there' – 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.'

The men in the *Canadian Boat Song* longed for the mountains and seas of home: 'We in dreams behold the Hebrides.' So did Russian poet Yevtushenko, when he wrote: 'I rely often on this ordinary thought: near Lake Baikal my own town waiting for me. And the wish to see the pines again, mute witnesses of time and its distance.'

The men in the trenches of World War One had this longing for the fields and hedgerows of home, as even now do our soldiers in the Middle East. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Eric Remarque tells of the longing to see again an avenue of trees in the German village of his boyhood.

As an exile for some years in the United States I longed to return home to Europe and have grass outside my back door. I finally came home and I have that grass now. But do I relish it now as much as I once longed for it? I think I do. I hope I do.

Did the men from the trenches – those who did come home – ever wander among those fields and hedgerows they had longed for? Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps there wasn't the time to. But there is something we can learn from their longing, from the longing of all exiles. It is this: we who are blessed to have those fields and hedgerows and mountains and skies which they longed for, and many still long for, should rejoice in them with that same intensity with which they longed for them.

But we cannot rejoice in them unless we see them.

Gazing versus glancing

So the first step is really to see. For mostly we don't. We don't notice the wonders of all that lives and flourishes around us. We are blind, calamitously so, as Helen Keller said.

What do we mean by see?

We use our eyes in many practical ways – to walk through a doorway and not bump into the wall; to guide a car down a

motorway; to read this book; to watch Man U score a goal on television. But is there more to seeing than just the mechanical registering of images?

Consider for a moment another of our five senses – hearing. We use our ears for practical things like having a conversation; listening to gossip; using a telephone; attending to an airport announcement. But we also use them for pleasure and joy – when we listen to music. Or to birdsong. But is there an equivalent to birdsong, for the eyes? I believe there is, but we have become blind to it.

That young woman by the river had seen beech leaves in sunlight before. But had she really *seen* them? Had she ever before been aware of how the sunlight filters through to create those tiny green flames? The wonder in her eyes that day suggests she was suddenly seeing them in an utterly different way. She was for the first time seeing their wonder and their beauty. Her eyes were opened. She was learning for the first time to gaze instead of glance. She was experiencing the Joy of Looking. She was encountering Mindfulness.

Most of us go through life seeing things and saying *So what?* What she said was *Omigod!* And the purpose of this little book is to try and change some of our so-whats into omigods. In other words, that we rediscover the music of the eye – to look with wonder at the wonders around us; sometimes even to look with awe; to see beyond the surface of things and encounter the mystery that underlies all things, living and non-living. If we can learn to do so, our lives will be incredibly enriched.

Enriched, how?

Einstein says it best: ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. His eyes are closed.’³

Plato put it another way, almost 24 centuries earlier: ‘God invented or bestowed sight on us for this express purpose, that

on surveying the circles of intelligence in the heavens we might... set right our own silly wanderings and blunders.’⁴

Perhaps if he had been aware of the teachings of Siddhartha Guatama Buddha, who lived a century before him in the East, Plato might have encountered the actual word Mindfulness (*Satipatthana*), for that was what he seems to have been on about.

Learning to look

An American friend living in the North of England told me of a visit he had from a twenty-year-old niece. He was dying to show her the beauty of Britain, so he and his wife drove her all through the Lake District. When they reached Grasmere, the exasperated young woman turned to them and said, ‘Y’all listen here, now. Can’t ya get it into your dumb heads – ah don’t *do* scenery!’

It seems that shopping malls were what she ‘did’, and there weren’t a lot of those in Grasmere.

I’d like to think that that young woman may some day ‘do’ more than that. Maybe her eyes will be opened, and she will grow, as William Blake put it, ‘to see a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower.’

Many of us, however, are like that young woman. Yet we were not always so. As small children we were mindful: we noticed and marvelled at everything. But somehow our eyes clouded over with some kind of spiritual cataracts, and we now no longer see the things we once saw. They are still marvellous, but we fail to marvel.

If we can learn once more to see what is around us, to have the Joy of Looking and thus be mindful, all sorts of amazing things start to happen to us. We begin again to experience wonder, awe, and the serenity that that these bring to us even in the midst of the chaos and awfulness that surround us everywhere in the world.

Viktor Frankl, the Jewish psychologist imprisoned at Auschwitz, describes the saving grace of the few tiny glimpses

of nature they managed to get in that hellhole – a little bird perched on a nearby twig; a sunset seen through a barbed-wire fence. The cover of Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, shows a strand of barbed wire in close-up. On that wire perches a tiny finch.⁵

But first we must learn to look and really see. To gaze instead of glance.

If we can just learn once more to be mindful of the world around us, to really *see* it, the wonder and the awe will take care of themselves. Many years ago that great American conservationist Rachel Carson put it succinctly: ‘For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, “What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?”’⁶

There are lots of wonderful books on Mindfulness and how to acquire it (see below). This present book is simply on one particular aspect of it – namely the joy of opening our eyes to the physical world around us – whether trees or sky or ocean or mountains – and the Mindfulness that this brings us. I shall try to do this by sharing with you the wonderful things that *I* see around me, so that you, dear reader, may see them too. Or if you already see them, perhaps we can share our wonder together.



Suggestions

- There are several inspiring books on Mindfulness. Best are the simple, clear introductions by the acknowledge masters, Thich Nhat Hanh and Jon Kabat-Zinn. These are listed at the end of this book. These books can change your life.
- Next time you find yourself just glancing at something, try switching to gazing. In other words, give it your full attention

for maybe just a minute. But don't say, I'll do it the next time. Next times rarely come. Do it now.

- Remember the Tower-of-London Syndrome? Why not pick out something special in your area that you've always intended to visit, but never got around to? And go there this weekend. You'll be glad you did.
- I have photographed many of the things described in this book. I should love to print the pictures here, but that would cost too much. However I have a marvellous solution – we've created a website for the book, so you can see the pictures there. Already there are hundreds waiting for you to look at, and I'll be uploading at least one new one every day as part of my blog. (There are 75,000 pictures on my computer, my best from a lifetime of photographing, so there should be plenty to draw upon!) Take a look – the web address is on the back cover.
- There's a place for your comments on the website... I'm hoping that the website along with the book could be the start of a worldwide dialogue on Mindfulness and the Joy of Looking. So do please post your views – anything you say will be welcomed. (I'll be repeating this invitation in several of the following chapters, simply because people like to dip into chapters at random, and might otherwise miss it.)

2: Explosion of trees

*Next time, when you see a tree,
see if you can say Thanks from your heart*

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

*Trees are the earth's endless effort
to speak to the listening heaven*

~ Rabindranath Tagore

*The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago.
The second best time is now*

~ Chinese proverb

*The wonder is that we can see these trees
and not wonder more!*

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

*All around us are the growing trees to remind us
that leaf is almost synonymous with life,
for through their greenness we exist*

~ Hervey Adams

IN THE northwest of Beijing is a park full of strange ruins. It is called Yuan Ming Yuan. The ruins are from an imperial palace that was destroyed by European troops at the end of the second Opium War in 1860. The park looks exactly like the old Willow Pattern we all know from grandma's plates, and may well have been the model for it – with shimmering lakes and

little bridges to pavilion-crowned islands. Hundreds of willow trees line the margins of the lakes, their fronds dipping towards the water.

I walked there once with a Chinese girl called Song, and I recited for her a little poem I remembered from childhood, about the Willow Pattern plate:

Two pigeons flying high,
Chinese vessel sailing by.
Weeping willow hanging o'er,
Bridge with three men
If not four

'You say *weeping willow*?' Song asked. 'We also think they are sad – because they mean farewell to us. See how those willow branches droop down and move in the breeze? For us they are lovers waving farewell with their long imperial sleeves.'

A few trees stand outside the car-park entrance to Auschwitz and they are hideous. Their bare limbs are contorted as if the trees had been tortured and are still in anguish. I doubt if a bird could bear to perch on one of their branches.

I wonder if those trees have somehow absorbed the awfulness of the place and if that has shaped them so. Or whether they have patterned themselves on the tortured souls who once existed there.

Some trees do indeed seem to mimic us, seem almost humanoid. Some have their branches raised to heaven in supplication; others spread their branches as if to shelter the world around them. 'When anyone asks me about the Irish character,' writes author Edna O'Brien, 'I say look at the trees. Maimed, stark and misshapen, but ferociously tenacious.'

END OF EXTRACT

¹ Wilde, Oscar. *Complete Works*. London: Collins, 2003

² Mitchell, Gordon. *R.J. Mitchell: Schooldays to Spitfire*. London: The History Press, 2006. (As cited in *Aeroplane Monthly*, September 2011, page 19)

³ Einstein, Albert: 'The World As I See It'. Essay originally published in *Forum and Century*, Vol. 84, pp. 193-194 – 13th in the Forum series, *Living Philosophies*

⁴ Plato. *Timaeus*. Translated from Stallbaum Text by Henry Davis, MA. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854. Page 353

⁵ Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. London: Rider, 2004

⁶ Carson, Rachel & Kelsh, Nick. *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998. Page 67