

PUBLICATION

Mindfulness and the Art of Finding Yourself in the Wilderness

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I spend a lot of my time giving presentations around the country and am looking forward to speaking to many of you at a virtual program celebrating Women's History Month in March.

These days, I spend an equal amount of time chasing my kids around the house, the basketball court, or driving them to play practice. But **I am and always will be a long-distance hiker**, so I escape to the woods and recall that part of myself as often as I can. Many times, that's with my husband and children, and sometimes it's without.

But it's important for me to stay centered, regain perspective, and keep my feet under me when life swirls around like a hurricane with me in the eye of it.

I have to be honest. I had to look up what the word "mindfulness" means. I've been hearing it for years, and I know it's something good for me, but I just never took the time to find out exactly what it meant.

Mindfulness, according to mindful.org, is **"the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us."**

Some days, I do a decent job of being mindful; other days, I fail miserably, depending on the weather, how many emails are in my inbox, or how many of my son's Legos I step on while I'm making breakfast in the morning.

For a long-distance hiker, it's essential to be aware of where you are and what you're doing, and not get overwhelmed by your surroundings even when — or *especially* when — things aren't going your way.

Eleven years ago, I set the fastest known time on the Appalachian Trail. I hiked 47 miles a day for 46 straight days and in doing that, I broke a record that had been held exclusively by men for almost 40 years. Men have regained the crown and held it since an elite trail runner broke my record in 2016. As the lone female on that list, you could say I was a blip on the radar. Or you could say I helped usher in a new era where women regularly compete with (and beat!) men at the longest ultra-marathon distances and on trail records throughout the country and beyond.

A handful of times over the years, including on that record hike, I have gotten myself turned around on a trail, either because it's not clearly marked or because I was daydreaming or paying more attention to the trout lilies and coneflowers than the way I should be going.

One of my more common refrains is that **"the trail is a metaphor for life."** If that's the case, what do I do when I get "lost" and need to regain my perspective? What do I do when I'm not being mindful, when my mind has instead wandered from the very real and blessed place that I am called to be at this exact moment?

Well, **I go through a series of steps. And all of them have application in your life and in the life that I live off the trail** with my husband and our kids, our car payments and mortgage, and everything else that makes our world go round.

The first thing I do is **find a place to sit down and rest**. A stump or rock is better than nothing. Just to give my "barking dogs" a brief respite.

Then I **take a few deep breaths**. I regain my composure if I've lost it, clear my mind from the worry that's creeping in.

I don't know about you, but **a lot of times when I'm thinking negative thoughts, it's because I'm "hangry."** (There's something to those funny Snickers candy bar commercials about not being yourself when you're running on empty.) So, I have a bite to eat.

Next, I try to **appreciate my surroundings, specifically the beauty of where I am**. The fact that I am here and nowhere else. That I've been gifted with the ability to walk. That I can hear the birds, see the trees swaying in the wind, or hear the leaves crunching under my feet. That life is good and to keep moving through this world is better than the alternative.

After a few minutes, I **take out a map**. I look for clues to where I might be — a creek, a ridgeline, a trail junction. Anything that will help me locate myself. These days, I may even use my phone. Technology can be helpful when it's used the right way and for the right purpose.

I may find that the best way to move forward is actually to move backward — to retrace my steps to the place where I lost my way, such as an overlook or other identifier on the map.

Eventually, you just have to make the best decision you can with the information you have.

But before I start moving, I **take an inventory of the good stuff**. The water in my bottle; the warm clothes, sleeping bag, and tent in my pack. All the things I have going for me, which is usually a lot.

Then I give thanks. I am a praying type of person, so I will offer up one of those: a prayer for strength, for inner peace, for blessing. Gratitude is a good thing, I really believe.

And finally, I start moving again. If my break went the way it should have, I will feel the tide turning and will have found myself even if I haven't yet found my way. **You're a lot more likely to find your way if you find yourself.**

So ... what are those metaphors for you? A dinner out with a loved one? A good book? A walk to clear your head? Maybe just sitting on a rock, taking in your surroundings, and looking for all the good things "in your pack" that you have to be grateful for. The family and friends in your life. The work you do to provide for yourself and others. The meals you eat. The clothes you wear. A roof over your head.

Maybe you've made a mistake somewhere along the way and you need to retrace your steps. Maybe you've wronged someone and you need to make it right.

When you take a break and take stock of things, **your conscience can tell you what to do. But a lot of times, it won't be given that opportunity if you keep plowing ahead mindlessly with your head down and without a good sense of direction.**

When you feel lost, take a minute. Reset. Get your bearings. Look at the good in your life. Be grateful. When you do, you'll be ready to move forward again with purpose and conviction. And in the end, if you believe in yourself and your abilities, you *will* find your way.

Jennifer Pharr Davis is an internationally recognized adventurer, motivational speaker and author, and entrepreneur who has hiked more than 14,000 miles of trails on six continents. In 2011, she set the overall fastest known time on the Appalachian Trail by finishing the 2,185-mile foot path in 46 days (an average of 47 miles a day). And she hasn't slowed down since.

Jennifer has backpacked 700 miles while pregnant, walked across North Carolina while nursing her newborn son, and hiked in all 50 states with her two-year-old daughter.

She is a member of the President's Council of Sports, Fitness and Nutrition; was featured in the 2020 IMAX film Into "America's Wild"; and served on the board of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. In 2012, she was named "Adventurer of the Year" by National Geographic.