

6 Habits of Hope by Kate Davies

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Be where you are; otherwise you will miss your life. --Attributed to the Buddha

The first habit of hope I'd like to discuss is being present. This means paying attention to whatever is going on and not getting sidetracked or distracted — in other words, living where life is actually happening rather than in our heads. To understand the difference between being present and not being present, think of a time when you felt completely alert and aware. What was happening? Where were you? What did you see and hear? Chances are you can probably remember the situation very clearly. Then think of a time when you were completely preoccupied by all the thoughts in your head. Perhaps you were upset or worried, perhaps you were planning or fantasizing. Perhaps you were blaming someone for something they did, or perhaps you were justifying your own actions. Now ask yourself the same questions. What was happening? Where were you? What did you see and hear? It's probably a lot more difficult to recall the precise details of the situation. This is the difference between being present and not being present and it's a big one. Now consider how you felt when you were in the present moment and when you weren't. Chances are you feel much more alive and alert when you were in the present moment.

Being present sounds easy, but it isn't. The endless stream of conversation in our heads keeps us from being in the here and now. It's as if an internal committee is always commenting on our lives. Sometimes it is off in the past, rehashing what happened minutes, days, or years ago, sometimes it is lost in the future, daydreaming about what we could or should do in the coming days or years. And, almost always, it is judging, comparing, evaluating, reasoning, or just plain thinking. Although our bodies are physically in the present moment, our minds are usually wandering somewhere else. The French philosopher Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," but it may be more accurate to say, "I think, therefore I am not present."

One warm summer evening when my son was about eight years old, we were walking on a path beside the Ottawa River, close to where we lived. Actually, my son was on his bike and I was ambling along about 50 yards behind him. I was completely lost in my own thoughts and not present to him or our surroundings. Suddenly, he turned around, looked at me and said, "Check out those raccoons in the bushes." I roused myself from my reverie and looked where he was pointing, but I had missed them and only saw the branches falling back into place behind the rapidly departing animals. I did not see them because I was not present.

If we are not present, we will not see what's happening and therefore miss out on life.

Conversely, whenever we pay attention, life reveals itself to us. Being present slows us down so we can see and hear more. It increases our experience of life and lets us relate to our surroundings in a fresh and unobstructed way. Psychologist James Hillman called this “notitia.” “Notitia,” he said, “refers to that capacity to form true notions of things from attentive noticing. It is the full acquaintance on which knowledge depends.”¹ This “full acquaintance” makes everything feel spacious and timeless. In these magical moments when we are completely engaged with what is happening, we forget our sense of self. “I,” “me,” and “mine” dissolve into the vastness of the present moment. In the intensity of direct experience, the self dissipates like the morning mist revealing the sacred and the numinous. For me, this experience is indescribably hopeful.

Being present also cultivates intrinsic hope because it gives us more choices about how to act and makes it more likely that our choices will be appropriate in the moment. For instance, if you notice smoke coming out of a building, you can choose to respond or not. Awareness of the situation gives you the option of doing something about it — such as calling 911 or rushing inside to see if anyone needs to be rescued. Not being present and not seeing the smoke removes this choice and any actions that may follow.

Only in the present moment can we choose to take action and how to act. We can think about how we acted in the past and plan how we will act in the future, but only in the present moment can we actually decide to do something. This makes being in the present all the more important.

Mindfulness

Being present is not only about noticing what is happening in the external world; it is also about noticing what is happening in our minds. In fact, you can't have one without the other because we cannot perceive anything without the mind. This is the basis of mindfulness. Mindfulness can be defined as maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our sensations, feelings, and thoughts, without getting caught up in them. We just notice our experience and simply let it be, without being attached to it or elaborating on it in any way. In other words, we don't think about what comes up in our minds — we can just be aware of the thought. When you notice a sensation, feeling, or thought, you can let it be and gently return your attention to the present moment. If you feel happy, just notice that you feel happy without having an opinion about it. Similarly, if you feel sad, just feel sad. One of the most helpful mindfulness meditation instructions I ever received was to visualize thoughts as if they were bubbles floating in the air and to touch them gently with an imaginary feather so they burst, returning me to the present moment.

When you practice mindfulness, you tune into what you experience in the present moment. It's that experience, rather than the content of the sensation, feeling, or thought that you focus on. You don't need to get hooked by what is going on in your mind, you can just observe it. For me, mindfulness is like sitting outside on a warm, sunny day watching children playing without feeling the urge to join them. You watch them and smile at them, without getting sucked into their games.

To be more mindful, I find it helpful to think about what's going on in my mind as “storylines” — the stories I tell myself about my experience. Things like: “I'm right and he's wrong because. . .” “She has upset me so I don't want to be her friend anymore.” “He should do more to help.” Storylines reveal our beliefs and expectations about life and contain judgments of ourselves and others. We all have storylines and there's nothing inherently wrong with them. Indeed, they are necessary because they help us make meaning of our experience. They only become problematic when we think they represent

the truth.

Whenever we believe that our storylines are the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we are no longer in the present moment because we are so completely enmeshed in our preferred version of reality. This happens to all of us. It's easy to get emotionally attached to whatever we believe is right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair. But no one's storylines can ever represent the whole truth. By their very nature, storylines are subjective and partial because we each perceive life from our own perspective. My version of reality will always be different from yours because we are different people. When we appreciate this fact, we understand that our individual storylines about life are never completely accurate. Because of this, there's no need to be emotionally attached to them. As I say to my students, "Don't believe everything you think." There are always other ways of perceiving and interpreting any situation. By helping us to see our storylines, mindfulness enables us to be less attached to our beliefs, expectations, and judgments, so we can be more present.

Being less attached to our storylines also opens up new possibilities for action. Consider someone who believes that full-blown ecological catastrophe is inevitable. This storyline may or may not turn out to be correct, but regardless, think about how it affects the person who believes it. Not only would they feel completely hopeless, they would not have a reason to do anything positive or constructive. If they could be less attached to their storyline and allow for the possibility that it may not be too late, there would be some space for hope. The point is that we don't have to accept everything we think or feel as true. A thought can be just a thought, without the emotional baggage of belief or disbelief. So how can we be more present? In addition to noticing our storylines, we also need to understand the challenges to being fully present, especially distraction and selective attention.

Distraction

Distraction helps us to avoid unpleasant and unwanted feelings about the global eco-social crisis (see Chapter Three), but it also prevents us from being fully present. Distraction's ability to dull pain and suffering explains why we are so addicted to it. We don't want to face the mess we're in and all the uncomfortable feelings it evokes. However, the relief offered by distraction comes with a big price tag — it impedes our capacity to understand what is happening and respond appropriately. When we are distracted, we are less present, less aware of the dangers we face, less willing to grasp their significance, and less able to act appropriately. Author Maggie Jackson put it this way: "The (distracted) way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention — the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress.

Moreover, this disintegration may come at great cost to ourselves and to society. . . . The erosion of attention is the key to understanding why we are on the cusp of a time of widespread cultural and social losses."²

The best way to work with distraction is to notice how it operates in our lives. We can learn to recognize the countless diversions we create or encounter every day, understand how we are habitually hooked by them, and actively choose to be more present. Each of these steps requires self-discipline. We need to remember to watch for the things that pull us out of the here and now, understand how they entrap us, and bring ourselves back into the present moment — again and again and again. For example, I know that I am easily distracted by checking my email, drinking tea, surfing the internet, and watching British murder mysteries on PBS. What are your favorite distractions? How and why do they hook

you? It helps to know. Then when you notice you're distracted you can bring yourself back to the present. There's no need to feel guilty or beat yourself up when you notice you are distracted. It happens to everyone. You can just be aware that you have allowed yourself to be taken out of the present moment and gently return to it. With practice, you will gradually become more present. None of this is easy, however. I told myself I would not check my email until after I finished writing this section, but I gave into my craving and got distracted. It's about progress, not perfection.

Selective Attention

Selective attention is about focusing on specific features of a situation to the exclusion of all others. It's about not seeing some things because we are too busy concentrating on others. This is the opposite of distraction, but like distraction, it is very powerful.

For example, in the spring, I get totally obsessed by the state of my garden, overlooking the fact that spring comes much earlier now than it used to. The phenomenon of selective attention was convincingly demonstrated several years ago in an experiment called "The Invisible Gorilla."³ In this experiment, observers were asked to watch a short video of six people passing basketballs to each other and to count how many times the balls were passed. During the video, someone wearing a gorilla suit strolled into the middle of the action, faced the camera, thumped their chest, and then slowly left the field of view. When asked about what they had seen, about half of the observers did not mention the gorilla. They had not seen it at all. As instructed, they had counted the number of passes but the gorilla was invisible to them. When the gorilla was pointed out, they were amazed they had not seen it. This experiment demonstrates that people often see only what they want to see, that they don't see everything that's going on, and that they have no idea they are missing so much.

Sometimes we consciously choose what we give our attention to, such as the number of times the basketballs were passed, but often our choices are unconscious. These unconscious choices are influenced by our beliefs and expectations about life. We focus on what we want to see or expect to see. This is called confirmation bias. And it is extremely common. Here's an example with terrible consequences: Early physiologists believed that animals could not feel pain. This enabled them to do horrifically painful experiments on living creatures, despite their cries, screams, and avoidant behavior.

The physiologists' beliefs made them deaf and blind to the animals' suffering. Bringing this forward to today, we might ask ourselves how our beliefs and expectations blind and deafen us. What are we not seeing and hearing? One of the things we may not be paying attention to is the pain and suffering we are inflicting on the earth and each other. In other words, we may not be hearing Thich Nhat Hahn's bells of mindfulness. If we were more present to the earth and to each other, we would see and hear the misery we cause and probably act quite differently.

Now that we've considered the two main challenges to being in the here and now, let's look at how they can be overcome and what helps us to be present.

Meditation

One of the best ways to be in the present moment is to meditate. Meditation drops us into the here and now and can be done by anyone, anywhere, at any time. You don't need to be a monk, a hermit, or even particularly spiritual. You don't need to go to a retreat center or somewhere beautiful. You don't need to sit in silent contemplation for hours on

end. And best of all, meditation is free.

Many people think they can't meditate because their minds are so busy, but it's not about trying to get rid of thoughts. It is about changing your relationship with your thoughts. It's about training the mind to be less attached to thoughts and examining the nature of mind itself. Meditation is really very simple, even if it's not always easy. At a minimum, all it involves is taking a few deep breaths, becoming aware of the present moment and acknowledging what is happening in your mind.

Meditation is very beneficial. Not only is it calming and relaxing, it helps us become more aware of our experience and more knowledgeable about the nature of life itself. This is why meditation is part of many religious and spiritual traditions. Moreover, numerous studies have demonstrated that it has many health benefits, including lowering blood pressure, reducing chronic pain, and decreasing the incidence of headaches, insomnia, gastro-intestinal distress, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma and emphysema, and depression and anxiety. Some of these effects can be experienced almost immediately. You don't have to be a long-term meditator or dedicate your life to it. Even a few minutes a day can improve your health and wellbeing, just like you can benefit from a little jogging without being a marathon runner.

Whatever hesitations you may have about meditation, I highly recommend you try it. Here are some basic instructions:

- Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.
- Relax and sit comfortably with your spine erect. Close your eyes if you wish.
- Gradually become aware of the process of breathing. Pay attention to wherever you feel the breath most clearly — either at the nostrils, the back of your throat, or in the rising and falling of your abdomen.
- Allow your attention to rest in the breath. Let your breath breathe itself. Don't try to control it — just notice it and let it come and go naturally.
- Notice the sensations in your body and the feelings and thoughts in your mind. Sometimes it helps to name them. For instance, if you are thinking about what you will do tomorrow, you could say "planning" to yourself. Then gently return your attention to the breath.
- Remember that meditation is not about trying to get rid of sensations, feelings, or thoughts. It is about noticing them and not getting caught up in them or making them true.

I have had a daily meditation practice for many years and it has made an enormous difference in my life. It has helped me to be more present and more aware of my beliefs and expectations. It has helped me to stay open, calm, and relaxed. And perhaps most importantly, it has helped me increase my direct experience of life, giving me more choices and making me more hopeful.

Using Our Senses

Another way to be more fully present is to use our senses to the best of our ability. Most of us rely on our sight and hearing and are less aware of our other senses. But neglecting

some and taking others for granted limits our ability to perceive the richness and fullness of life. So by remembering to use all of our sensory equipment, we can be more present, experience more of life, and therefore be more hopeful. When I walk on the beach near my home on Puget Sound, I try to pay attention to the smell of the seaweed, the taste of the salty air on my tongue, the feel of the wind in my hair and the sand between my toes, the sound of the gentle slip-slop of the waves on the shore and the cries of the seagulls wheeling overhead. This gives me a much more intense, vivid, and hopeful experience of life.

Being in nature invites us to use our senses. It's as if the natural world calls out to be noticed. And when we do pay attention to it, we can be drawn into the present moment without trying. Noticing birds at the feeder, how trees bend in the wind, how flowers orient themselves to the sun, and even the way an ant scurries over the dirt draws us into the here and now like nothing else. It reminds us of the immensity of the world beyond human thought — a world that has endured for millennia and will continue to do so. By luring us into the present moment, being present to nature naturally evokes the experience of wonder.

Wonder

Wonder nurtures intrinsic hope because it cuts through our storylines and beliefs about life. Transcending thought, it penetrates us to the deepest levels of our humanity and lifts us up to the heavens. It affirms life's preciousness, power, and goodness. To me, there is no doubt that a life filled with wonder is more hopeful than one without.

Wonder is about being in the presence of something truly amazing that transcends the mundane and the everyday. It humbles us, lifts us up, and expands our awareness. Wonder is the positive feeling we get when we perceive something that thrills or delights us to the very core of our being.

One of the most profound experience of wonder I ever had took place when I was an awkward and rebellious 14-year-old. One summer evening, after an argument with my mom, I stormed out of our house in an English village, determined to run away forever. After I had gone about half a mile, I found myself in the local churchyard. I threw myself down on the grass between two headstones and wept. I felt angry at my mom and very sorry for myself. My life was so unfair. But then I looked up. The sky was a darkening indigo, with not a cloud in sight. The evening stars were beginning to sparkle against the vastness of the heavens and a thin crescent moon was rising behind the church spire. Some frogs were singing in a nearby pond. As I became more present to my surroundings, I stopped sobbing. After a few minutes of lying there in silence, everything seemed to shift and a sense of wonder gradually overcame me. My perceptions seemed heightened and my feelings deepened. Time stopped. I felt completely at one with everything and everyone. Words from the poem "Desiderata" came into my mind: "You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be."⁴

Many years later, I learned that psychologists call this a peak experience. Characterized by ecstatic and transcendent feelings, these experiences can be life changing. Whatever you want to call it, I know that my experience changed me and left me feeling more humble and accepting of life, as well as more positive.

Small children are often full of wonder. For them, every day reveals astonishing new

delights. But by the time they reach adulthood, this way of experiencing the world fades and life becomes dull and routine — a burden to be endured or a series of problems to be solved.

Naturalist Rachel Carson commented on this loss in her final book, *The Sense of Wonder*, saying:

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy, who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from sources of our strength.⁵

As adults, we often fail to notice the beauty of nature. But there is always something that can evoke wonder, even if you live in a downtown high-rise apartment. You can appreciate the way the clouds scud across the day-blue sky or the way the rain feels on your face. You can marvel at the wildflowers in a vacant lot, or the spiders' webs glistening with pearls of early morning dew. You can appreciate the warmth of the sun or the light of the moon.

You don't have to leave home, go on a fancy vacation, or spend a lot of money to experience wonder. By training ourselves to experience life's magnificence wherever we are, we can recover a childlike sense of wonder. I feel great reverence for the trees where I live in the Pacific Northwest. Sometimes I lie down on the mosses and ferns of the forest floor and look up at the Douglas firs, cedars, and hemlocks towering over me, their trunks rising straight out of the earth, their arching branches vaulting high above me. I feel as if I am in a holy place, a cathedral made of life itself. Wherever we live, we can experience wonder and be astonished at the everyday, every day of our lives.

Bearing Witness

Just as wonder nurtures intrinsic hope, so does bearing witness to life. Bearing witness means seeing what is happening and then reporting what we have seen to others. It's like being a witness in court who has seen a crime being committed and then testifies about what they saw to the judge and jury. To be a good witness, you need to observe and describe accurately, with as little interpretation, judgment, or emotional attachment as possible. Just the facts, as you saw them.

Bearing witness is a very powerful act because it relies on our experience rather than on what we think or feel about it. It reports what we observed, without embellishment or interpretation. By circumventing our opinions, bearing witness gets to the heart of the matter in a very direct way. It also creates a connection between us and whatever we are bearing witness to. By acknowledging what we have seen, we establish a relationship with it and allow others to have a relationship with it too. In this way, bearing witness affirms our interdependence.

Whether we are bearing witness to the wonder of life or to pain and suffering, it can nurture intrinsic hope. In 1989, I addressed the International Joint Commission (IJC) about the health effects of toxic chemicals in the Great Lakes. At the time, I was the Canadian co-chair of the IJC's Health Committee and heavily pregnant with my son. Without thinking

about it in advance, I used the opportunity to bear witness to the ubiquitous presence of toxic chemicals in the environment and in human beings. I looked at the Commissioners and the audience of several hundred people and said: "The child I am carrying is currently receiving the heaviest loadings of toxic chemicals that it will receive in its lifetime." The room fell utterly silent. You could have heard a pin drop. All eyes turned to my bulging belly as the power of my words resonated throughout the auditorium. Although the moment soon passed, I felt I had spoken a truth that needed to be expressed and this made me feel stronger and more hopeful.

Bearing witness can be a form of nonviolent resistance, especially when it is done by a group. Sometimes, nothing needs to be said. People can draw attention to their witness simply by their physical presence. For instance, Quakers are well known for bearing witness to war and violence by standing together in silence in public places and holding up banners proclaiming their message of peace. As a Quaker myself, I believe that bearing witness is part of our responsibility to each other and to the earth.

Being Present to the Universe

I would like to conclude this chapter by considering what it means to be present to this mysterious, vast, and ever-changing universe. So far, I have talked about being present to life in a small-scale way but what if we take a much larger perspective? What if we consider astronomer Carl Sagan's revelation that "we are a way for the cosmos to know itself?"⁶ What does this do to nurture intrinsic hope?

This astonishing insight makes sense to me. After all, we are made from the universe. Every single atom in our bodies — the calcium in our bones, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our cells — was created billions of years ago in a star, all except atoms of hydrogen and a few other light elements that were formed even earlier, shortly after the Big Bang about 13.7 billion years ago. And it isn't just our physical bodies. Everything humankind can know, think, feel, imagine, or dream comes from the universe. In other words, consciousness must be a property of the universe itself.

In this way, the existence of our species is a way for the universe to know itself. Through human consciousness, the universe is becoming aware of itself. Without any conscious beings could the universe be aware of itself? Thomas Berry put it this way: "In reality the human activates the most profound dimension of the universe itself, its capacity to reflect on and celebrate itself in conscious self-awareness."⁷ To me, this is a truly awe-inspiring source of intrinsic hope.

TRY THIS

one: Whenever you remember to do so, ask yourself "Am I present?" or "Where am I right now?" Make these questions a regular practice in your life. Notice what happens when you check in with yourself like this — you naturally find yourself in the present moment.

two: Stop whatever you are doing and quietly observe what is happening around you right now. Bring all your attention to your senses. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you touch, smell, or taste? Don't think about it, just experience the present moment as fully as you can.

three: Remember to pause several times a day and take three deep breaths. Pay attention to the inhale and the exhale and then notice any sensations, feelings, or thoughts. Don't get caught up in them. Just observe them and let them go.