

MINDFUL GRATITUDE

**PRACTICING THE ART
OF APPRECIATION**

CHRISTEL B. WENDELBERGER

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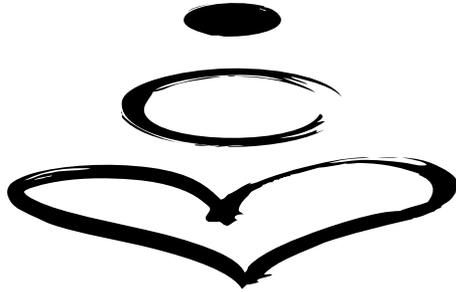
The following is a chapter from the book *Mindful Gratitude: Practicing the Art of Appreciation* published by Forward Communications

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Sunny Day Worm

I used to have a very bad habit. I would sometimes find it quite uncomfortable to wear my wedding rings. They felt binding and sort of aggravated my skin. Rather than bearing this slight discomfort, I used to take my rings off, no matter where I was, and carelessly stick them into my pockets.

I knew this was a bad idea, because one time, while wandering through a Sears store, I took off the ten-year diamond anniversary band that my husband Michael gave me, tucked it into a pocket that I knew was too shallow, and never saw the ring again. But bad habits die hard. So, for a long time, I kept taking my rings off and putting them into my pockets, half absentmindedly, half knowing I was flirting with danger.

Then one day I went to pull my rings from the pocket of the

pants I had been wearing the day before. My hand plunged into the pocket almost as thoughtlessly as it had when I stuck the rings there in the first place. I pulled out one ring – the golden wedding band that my mother gave us. I checked the other pocket and found a drugstore receipt for diapers and milk, a nickel, a Lego wheel, and my debit card – but not the second ring.

The diamond ring, the one Michael and I purchased together on a special trip, was gone. After a good search of the immediate area – the bedroom floor, the pockets of a few other pants that were lying on the chair – I thought, well, this has happened before. I'll just keep my eyes open. It'll turn up.

Days passed and the ring did not turn up. It wasn't in the kitchen or the bathroom or in my purse. I secretly wondered if maybe Michael found it and wanted to teach me a lesson by hiding it from me. I also feared the worst – that the ring went the way of the ten-year diamond anniversary band. That it fell out into the world, never to be seen by me again.

I tried not to obsess about the missing ring. With three kids, a husband, and my work, I really didn't have time to obsess about a missing ring. But worry simmered in the background, and I was more than a little disappointed with myself for

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neglecting a lesson I should have learned after the Sears incident.

Fortunately, that summer, I finally started a committed practice of mindfulness and meditation. After years of *reading* about the benefits of meditation, the power of NOW, the depth, richness, joy, and improved effectiveness that comes from experiencing the present moment, I made the decision to learn how to meditate and to make it a daily, morning ritual. I had the tremendous good fortune of meeting two wonderful teachers from India, the support of a dear friend who was also walking down this new path, and, *at last*, the necessary combination of desire and discipline to begin the practice of meditation and living in the present.

But what does it *mean* to live in the present? As a beginner (and I suspect I will *always* be a beginner) I take it to mean, at least in part, paying closer attention to everything around me – the sounds that I hear, the temperature of the air, the colors of the things I see, the textures of the things I touch. As a beginner, my attempts to be present don't always succeed.

My mind, like most typical human minds, is easily drawn into the melee of all that “needs to get done” – the calls to make, the e-mails to send, the projects, the shopping, the dinners,

the bills, the kids and their whole lives. During any random three-minute period, my overactive mind might flit from thoughts of cleaning the bathroom to the state of global affairs to where my kids will go to college and *how exactly* we're going to pay for it, back to "Geez – I need to pick up some paper towels."

So one sunny morning a few weeks after the ring disappeared, surrounded by the hopeful atmosphere of my new commitment, I woke up and started my day like any other. I stretched. I meditated. I drank coffee and worked in my office for a couple hours. Then, when I heard a hint of stirring below, I headed downstairs to spend the rest of the morning with the kids.

It was warm and lovely outside and still quiet in the house. Only Charlie was awake, and he was ready to eat. Searching for a gallon of milk for cereal, I set out to the garage and the second fridge to see what I could find. As I walked on the sidewalk through my backyard, I had to step over a long earthworm who was stretched out over the cement.

It seemed odd to see a live worm relaxing on a sidewalk on such a dry, sunny morning, and I was briefly reminded of how much I loved worms when I was a kid. I loved to watch them, and pick them up, and wonder about them. The memory was

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so vivid, yet seemed so odd. Mostly, because as a city-loving adult, I cultivated an appalling, even embarrassing, *lack* of appreciation for nature.

As I got to the garage and punched in the code to the automatic opener, I thought about what a great invention the garage door opener is. Then I thought about ALL the button-punching inventions that we take for granted every day. Our lives are filled with gadgets and creations that make things move or cook or calculate by what seems to be pure magic, but which actually reflect humanity's amazing ability to harness the forces of nature for our collective growth and convenience.

Two hundred years ago if someone had suggested that humans would soon fly through the heavens in winged planes and rockets, or talk to each other on tiny, handheld wireless devices from anywhere around the globe, or look at images of the insides of our bodies and know with certainty the gender and condition of a baby months before she is born, it would have all sounded like pure, crazy magic. The speculators of such fancy might have been declared insane or blasphemous. Yet somehow, in a relatively short time, human beings have cracked essential codes of the physical universe to bring us all of this and so much more.

As the huge garage door opened at my button-punching

command, I started to think about some of the things that leaders at the vanguard of human potential are saying today that sound to lots of people like pure, crazy magic. Fantasy. Impossible. I thought about the medical pioneers who are teaching people how to heal themselves through meditation and visualization. I thought about the spiritual and intellectual leaders who believe that we can direct the enormous internal energy that exists inside the human mind and body to attract and achieve exactly what we want in life – the relationships, jobs, homes, experiences, everything.

I wondered whimsically if someday we might learn to direct human energy like laser beams to produce what we want with rapid speed. Will my grandchildren be able to blink their eyes like magical genies to produce lunch on demand? More seriously, will they know how to use the energy within them to guide their lives with deep precision, avoiding the meandering, unconscious choices and mistakes that create so much stress, anxiety, sadness, and destruction in our personal lives and the world?

With these lofty thoughts dissolving, I reached for the milk and tried to bring myself back to the present moment. I pressed those magic buttons to close the garage door and headed for the house, noticing the feel of the cold, heavy milk in my hand.

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The long earthworm was in the same place on the sidewalk. But instead of stepping over him, I decided to do what I would have done as a child. I stopped to observe him and wonder about his world. Then, to make it more fun, I went to get my 8-year old son, Charlie, to watch the worm with me.

Charlie came out of the house, wearing a messy morning hairdo and his boxer shorts, to sit with his mom on the sidewalk and watch a worm. Quietly, we observed that the worm was so simple, sort of like one long muscle, yet moving using the same energy and source that animates our own complicated, thinking, interactive human bodies. And *moving* he was.

The worm started crawling at a rather quick speed. Squeezing and stretching his purple-gray body in a very specific direction. Without words, we continued to watch. The worm inched toward the edge of the sidewalk where the cement meets the grass. He slid down from the cement into the grassy ditch and took a hard left. Suddenly I saw something golden underneath some old dry leaves. Before I could even process what I saw, Charlie yelled, "Mom! Your ring! What is your ring doing out here?"

Stunned – really truly stunned – I picked the ring out of the grass, blew the black dirt from it, and stared at it in the palm of my hand. Was *this* an example of the magic of the universe

I had just been wondering about? Had my internal energy or intuition directed me to watch the worm so he could show me where my ring was? Why was a worm out on my sidewalk on such a dry, sunny morning anyway? Did he know me? Was he waiting for me? Waiting to say:

“Hey. You. Grown-up lady. Remember me? Remember how you used to focus on me like I was all that mattered, and hold me in your hands without fear, and think about the mysterious dirt and earth that is my home? Remember how you entered my world completely, laying your head on the warm grass, never worried about dirt or germs? Remember how you gently pulled the blades of grass from their roots so you could stare at them and imagine how they grew?”

WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? *Why don’t you pay attention anymore? All the richness and wonder you loved just a few decades ago is still right here under your feet. If you’re willing to pay attention, the world will show you everything.”*

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That day the worm showed me something that the great scientists, inventors, artists, and spiritual teachers have known forever: Presence is the gateway to the secrets of the universe. In paying attention, in noticing the smallest and seemingly most insignificant of things – like a thick earthworm relaxing on dry cement – there are grand discoveries to be made. In quiet, mindful observation we can find answers to our deepest questions – even those we didn't know we were asking.

Since that mysterious, miraculous, sunny day when the worm showed me my ring, I have cherished it as a sacred symbol of the essential importance of paying attention to my life and staying connected to the present moment. As a beginner I am far from living every moment in the present. My copies of various books by the world's great spiritual teachers are dog-eared from my constant need for reference and will forever have a place on the nightstand next to my bed. But I am absolutely committed to practicing a life of presence and gratitude – and so very grateful for the sunny day worm who shared his secret with me.

Reflection Points

Finding the ring was an amazing moment for me. If Charlie hadn't been there to see it too, I would still wonder if it really happened! And while the incident itself was certainly incredible, the real lesson of the experience is to stay alert to what life presents in any given moment. Cultivating the ability to observe life, with the curiosity of a great scientist or artist or unencumbered child, offers a brilliant key to discovery, truth, and enlightenment. Instead of simply walking on the earth, I am reminded to take time to walk *as part of* the earth, acknowledging the natural world on every level, including the tiny universe that lives beneath our feet. In your ***Mindful Gratitude Journal***, consider writing about some of these questions and ideas:

-  Close your eyes and remember a quiet activity that you loved as a child. What was your favorite thing to do when you were alone - drawing, pretending, playing with worms, building with blocks or Legos, digging in the dirt? What details can you remember about those activities? Why did you love them? How did you feel when you were fully immersed in those moments of peace and focus and flow? Describe your memories.

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 Observe the natural world. Find a living plant, tree, grass, insect or animal to observe in your home, yard, or neighborhood. You could even watch a person or persons, if you are able to watch without interacting. Observe for five or ten minutes, noticing the colors, rhythms, and movements of your subject. Describe what you see.

 Have you had an amazing or spiritual moment in your life when the normal rules of physics or logic seem to have been suspended? Describe the circumstances of the experience. What was going on just prior to the experience? Write down whatever you can remember. Who can you thank?

 What puts you into a state of flow or presence? What activities in your work, personal life, relationships, or free time require or bring about a state of presence? Describe the activities and how you feel when you are in the flow.

About the Author



Christel B. Wendelberger is a writer and communications consultant living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is the founder of Forward Communications, a firm specializing in strategic communications, executive coaching, fund development, and writing services for non-profit organizations.

As a strategic thought and communications specialist, Christel has a guiding faith in the essential goodness and infinite potential of every individual to play a transformational role in his or her own inner life, family, community and the world. Her work reflects a deep belief that within every individual and organization there exists a treasure trove of ideas that when deeply explored and clearly articulated represent the seeds of human progress.

Christel also leads dynamic interactive seminars on grant writing, philanthropy, and mindfulness. *Mindful Gratitude: Practicing the Art of Appreciation* is now a unique workshop and retreat designed for workplaces, community centers, and other groups.

Christel is married to her best friend and is the mother of three miraculous children whose sheer existence is a source of endless gratitude.

MINDFUL GRATITUDE: PRACTICING THE ART OF APPRECIATION

This sparkling collection of personal essays will capture your heart, engage your imagination, and help you find the extraordinary in your life, no matter your current circumstances. Here you'll discover magic in the mundane, celebration in loss, and a deep appreciation for all that is. But viewing life through a lens of gratitude takes practice, especially in our sometimes messy, busy, burdened and imperfect lives. Each of these stories is followed by reflective journaling questions designed to help you:

- Find **YOUR** story.
- Explore its **MEANING**.
- Celebrate the beauty that exists in your life **RIGHT NOW**.

Gratitude is one of the simplest and most profound gateways to greater peace, joy, wellness, and better relationships. Start practicing today!

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING:

"These are exquisite writings. Precious gifts. The world will be better, people who read these words will be better because of the form you have given them."

- Colleen Fitzgerald, Business Executive and Founder of PEARLS for Teen Girls

"I want to share these stories with my friends and family NOW! You have a gift Christel--for getting to the thing of the matter in a most eloquent way. Thank you for sharing these beautiful stories."

- Heidi Wick, City Attorney

"This work is amazing-- moving & tender."

- Lisa Grosz, Elementary School Teacher



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