

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - CORY MUSCARA (Katie Elliott & Cory Muscara)

My guest on today's show is Cory Muscara, author of 'Stop Missing Your Life: How to be Deeply Present in an Un-present World'. In 2012 Cory spent six months living in silence as a monk in Burma. He's now an international speaker and teacher of mindfulness and presence.

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Welcome Cory.

Thanks Katie.

Cory, I have been reading your new book and enjoying it so very much. There are so many things I'd love to ask you about - so can I ask you some questions about the book and about your story?

Yes, yes you can.

Okay. So the first one, I am so curious about this... As a very young man, you took yourself to Burma and you spent six months in a Buddhist monastery being quiet.

Yeah.

Can you tell us a little bit about what it's like to have that experience?

Sure. Well, first it might be a number of people are wondering, why do something like that? There were a lot of things that came together to motivate such a quest, if you want to call it that, but I was specifically interested in, what is the potential to cultivate a quality of peace, contentment, wellbeing that is not solely contingent upon the external variables of our life? And I could see that, up until that point, my primary way of pursuing wellbeing was in arranging all the puzzle pieces of my life so that I could get the picture, the puzzle picture, to look good. And I was exhausting myself in the process, trying to perfectly manufacture my life and was also increasingly getting disillusioned by that being able to offer any permanent refuge. So it led me into meditation and then I wanted to take it deeper. And the logic of going into this monastic setting was - well maybe if I sever myself from the things that are currently bringing me comfort, happiness: family, friends, stuff related to job stuff (at that point I had just graduated college) - so sever myself from all of these things and see if I can cultivate that quality of peace, a deeper quality of peace from within. So that was the motivation and I knew it was going to be difficult, but I think I had a romantic idea of what that difficulty would be like. And it was very, very painful. And in addition to just the austerity of the place itself - you know, doing 14 hours of meditation a day, eating two small meals

before 11:00 AM, the mattresses were so thin you could squeeze them between your finger and feel the bone on the other side - there was that level of austerity, but eliminating distractions and so many forms of distractions we're not even aware of in our lives. Anytime that we could pull out our phone, that could be a form of distraction. Eating food whenever we want throughout the day, that could be a form of distraction. TV, media, all of that. Here it's just you and yourself, 24/7, all day long, and that's profoundly reconnecting. Like you get to experience yourself and the fullness of yourself and parts of yourself you haven't touched in a while - there's something beautiful there. But also all the parts of you that maybe you've been running from or hiding from, suppressing, that comes to the surface too. And where there's beauty in that discomfort is that you get to meet the fullness of who you are, especially those parts that you've cast into the shadows and befriend those aspects, heal, forgive, take care of and learn to make space for the multitudes and the many dimensions that are within you. And although that might sound like a little out there, what it leads to is this profound sense of peace and befriending of yourself, peace within yourself and befriending of yourself, that leads to this really nice sense of ease and calmness and cosiness that many of us are craving for in our lives.

That sounds so beautiful. What I'm imagining though is on the path to befriending yourself, there may be a little bit of a struggle? I mean, is there some discomfort in getting to that point where you feel friendly towards yourself?

Oh yeah. There's a lot of hating yourself first. Yeah. So one of the things I value about the meditation practice, and even if we just look at the meditation like very simply of sitting down, focusing on your breath and more or less being still for a period of time. You can only go through that process beating yourself up for whatever you experience for so long before you completely let go of the practice or before the practice causes you to surrender and let go of that tension. Because when you're meeting yourself that intimately, you can't not be gentle and soft with yourself because it will just be too hard. If you're beating yourself up for every thought that arises, getting angry for every pain that comes up, resisting every emotion that you experience, it's just going to be such a bumpy ride. And most people go through that in a retreat setting, but also in their own meditation practice. If there are any meditators listening right now, maybe you've experienced that, that you can create a lot of excess suffering for yourself in how you relate to your experience and how you relate to yourself. So almost as a survival mechanism - that might be strong -but almost as a way to avoid more pain and discomfort, the mind starts to organically let go and allow you to experience this moment as it is. And that could be moments of joy and pleasure, like you give yourself permission to experience that. But it could also be the insecurity, the doubt, the vulnerability, the sadness, the grief. We get to a place where we can actually make space for that in our minds and our hearts. And when we do, we're

no longer running from ourselves and from our experience. And that's where the peace comes in the practice, right? And that's the whole premise of the peace that can come from meditation is that it's not going to come when you get to someplace where all the puzzle pieces of your life are arranged perfectly. That just doesn't exist. And if it does, it's, it's fleeting. Either the puzzle pieces will change or your relationship to them will change and you'll want something better. So the peace comes when we can actually get to a place where the mind is not incessantly striving to get someplace else or someplace better and yeah, and so that just happens, but it often happens first through struggle.

Something that I'm really loving about the way that you write is the fact that you are so open about the fact that the human experience is full of all sorts of things and some of those things can be really painful and messy. There was a little quote that I found here: "Life's full range of experiences never go away, and the deepest enlightenment doesn't change any of that". And I love that so much because sometimes it feels to me as if we can be kind of looking for a miracle cure or a kind of a fix and that if we find out how to do things better then it's going to make all of those difficult things go away.

Yeah.

And my personal experience has been that my life has changed profoundly, but it hasn't got less painful. It's just that the pain doesn't unsettle me in the way that it used to. And so I find it really reassuring to read what you say about that messiness just being part of our experience. It's not something that we're trying to get away from or eliminate.

Mmm, yeah, exactly. And another topic related to that in the book that I go into is that a big thing I encourage is 'befriending' over 'transcending'. Now, transcendence is a complicated word and it means different things for different people. But what I noticed for a lot of people in their pursuit of wellbeing, especially if they're taking more of a, let's say, a spiritual approach. Or even just in meditation, right? There's this idea of, "Okay, I'm gonna sit down and I'm going to transcend my experience, transcend my body, transcend my pain, and get to some blissed out Buddha-like state". Well, the bliss that the Buddha experienced came from actually radically befriending all aspects of his experience. And that's where we can sometimes get caught in our meditation practice is by trying to get someplace else or trying to rise above the raw messy side of our life before we actually make peace with it, before we touch it and learn how to be with it, learn how to hold it, learn how to say, "Ah, I see you, you're welcome here too, as much as I don't like you or I'm frustrated by you, I respect that you're a part of my experience and there might be some positive intention to you being here, I'm not sure. But resisting you is like resisting gravity." Eventually we need to learn how to make peace and walk gracefully with it. So yeah, enlightenment's another

complicated word and people have different ideas for it, but many people think like you just stop experiencing emotions and that's not true. The Dalai Lama will in one moment be crying, talking about his mother and then in the next moment be in this deep belly laugh. He gives himself permission to experience what's here now and then can gracefully transition into the next moment. And that's a quality of peace and joy that's very fluid and easy and one that I think we can see as maybe a possibility to develop.

So there's something about the ability to flow in and out of different states of being...

Mm.

...without lots of resistance or kind of attachment to them.

Yeah.

And when you say it's something perhaps we can cultivate, I think when you look at little children, they seem to do that more naturally maybe?

Mm. Yes. So that's an interesting one, Katie, because you're right, and children do have access to their emotional landscape, their inner worlds, and moving fluidly between it better than any adults. I think that's undeniable. Just watch a child, they're crying, they're laughing, they're yelling, it's all happening within 30 seconds. And it is so interesting to watch how fluidly they can move between those experiences. And yet, is that the state that we're trying to get back to? Right? Because a child can also still experience quite a bit of pain in being themselves. They haven't learned to regulate their attention yet. When they have those experiences, especially the difficult ones, they're usually full on in it. And so they haven't yet developed a capacity to hold that experience in awareness with more spaciousness. And so although they do have a lot of access to their human experience, they're very much riding it like a rollercoaster. And a child is just a little adult, like learning how to be an adult, and I think there's something we're trying to get back to as we practise our humanness, that a child is pointing to. And at the same time, a child doesn't yet have all the resources they need to navigate the world. So we're both building resources and also like peeling back some of the layers of guarding that we've put up.

So there's something about that child-like flow in and out of those experiences, but then there's also a detachment from them so we're not actually so invested in them? Is it something along those lines?

Yeah. Yes it is. And the practice of mindfulness is this capacity to be with our experience versus being in our experience, in a way that's spacious, curious and heartfelt. And you can imagine your life as a river going down a mountain, let's

say. And much of the time we are just caught in the river, smashing into the banks, the whitewater or wherever it wants to take us. And what we get to practice in mindfulness is actually sitting on the bank of the river, watching the river go by. Same river, same you, different relationship but very different experience. And in that way, we're not denying the river. We're not there for the river. We're just shifting how we're experiencing the river. And that is one of these distinctions between how a child experiences their emotions versus perhaps how the Dalai Lama might experience his emotions. And is one that allows us to experience our life fully, perhaps even more intimately, but without being so sucked into it and drowning into it. And I think many of us are familiar with what that's like - to be caught in a thought pattern and just have no way out of it or be caught in an emotion and not be able to see any space around it or even in physical pain and it's just the only thing in our experience. Mindfulness broadens our sense of self and what we can see, not with the eyes, but with our awareness, so that there's always a sense that who we are is bigger and more spacious than whatever the experience of the moment might be.

So the world and the human experience doesn't change, but our perspective changes, and that's everything.

That's it, yes. Yeah.

A term that you use a lot in the book is, you talk about softening, which I think is so lovely. When you describe our attachment to our thoughts and our ability to get so caught up in what's going on in our minds and really believe in everything that we think, there can be such rigidity and fierceness in that, I think. Can you tell us a little bit about what you mean by that 'softening'?

Yeah. It's a word that I didn't know how much I should use it in the book. I use it a lot in my teachings, but not always early on because it can be confusing for people. One thing I like to say to highlight this is just like 'soften into experience'. And some people immediately feel like, "Oh yeah, I get that". And others are like, "What the heck are you talking about?" So the imagery that comes to mind is a hand pressing into a tempurpedic mattress. We're enveloping our experience with our awareness, we're not fighting it, we're not pushing against it, but we're meeting it and we're gently relaxing into it, gently touching it, and getting a little closer. So I'll just use a meditation practice again to describe this cause it's often where this is going to come up, but when you sit down and you meditate or something like focus on the breath, it's inevitable that you're going to experience some tension as time goes on. And a lot of times when people are focusing on the breath, they do it in the same way that they try and do a lot of other things in their life. Like, "I'm going to get this right, I'm going to be the best meditator in the room, no one's going to be as peaceful as I am". And you focus really hard and it just creates this extra tension in the body. And I think maybe as you're listening right now, you

could sense what the difference between that like, "Right, get this right, focus, focus, focus" versus "I'm just going to experience this breath as it is right now" or "In this moment, things are like this, this moment is like this", that kind of just, "Oh, it's like this right now, let me just meet it as it is". Rather than forcing, making it something, trying to get somewhere with it. That's this quality of softness where we settle back into our life rather than constantly trying to get into the next moment or fight what is here. And it doesn't mean that we passively resign to life and go, "Oh alright, well maybe this is just my plot in life. I'll accept all the conditions." That's not it at all. It's more the reality that if you want to take care of the future, you have to first take care of the present because the future doesn't exist anywhere other than the present moment. No one's ever lived in the future. The future is just an idea that we hold in the present. And yet so many of us are trying to get out of the present that we're not taking care of this moment well enough to be able to influence anything that might be happening in the future. So when we soften into just being here and just taking care of this conversation, just taking care of "What am I doing right now? What am I feeling right now? What am I experiencing right now?" That reorientation to yourself ends up having a huge impact on what will happen next and how you'll experience the next moment and, you know, subsequently the future. So softening in is more a reminder that your life is not happening anywhere other than right now. And you can fight, push to get out of it, but that's just going to create more tension for you. And eventually we might need to learn how to be more here and allow ourselves to be more here.

It's funny. It can feel so back to front. We can feel so compelled to make an effort all the time.

Yes. Yes.

Cory, do you have a Little Challenge that we could all be trying?

Yes. So there's a short story I'd like to share that will preface the challenge. It's about a Zen farmer and this farmer had a horse on his farmland that he used this horse to till his fields all day long. But one day this horse ran off into the mountains and the farmer no longer had help. All the neighbours, all the villagers came by and said, "We're so sorry, this is such bad luck". And the farmer responded, "Bad luck, good luck - who knows?" The villagers were kind of confused, but they went back. Now a week later, the farmer was out there trying to figure out what to do and saw the horse coming back in the distance. But not just the horse itself. The horse had a whole herd of other horse friends. So now the farmer had all of this extra help. The villagers naturally came by and I said, "Wow, this is such good luck, we're so happy for you". The farmer says, "Good luck, bad luck - who knows?" Another week goes by, the farmer's son is working with one of the new horses to help train it and falls off its back, breaks his leg. And of course the villagers come by, "We're so sorry, this is such bad luck". Farmer goes, "Bad

luck, good luck - who knows?" Two weeks go by and the Army's coming through town conscripting every able-bodied man they could find. They come across the farmer and his son, they see the son has a broken leg and they say, okay, and they keep moving by. Of course all the villagers come by, "Oh my God, this is just such great luck". And can you guess what the farmer said? "Good luck, bad luck - who knows?" So in life we create a lot of extra tension for ourselves, trying to make every moment meet what our expectations are of it. And everyone's had the experience where something bad happens, but ends up leading to something good or something good happens and ends up leading to something bad. And we can drive ourselves crazy trying to control all of our moments to be what we think we want them to be. But in reality, we never even know what it's going to lead to anyway. So my Little Challenge would be to take this phrase into your day to day life. "Good luck, bad luck - who knows?" Bring it into the difficult moments that arise and see if you can hold that perspective. And the harder one - see if you can bring it also into the good moments and not cling so deeply to this having to be the thing that offers refuge, but instead be able to settle back into more of an equanimous mind state that just goes, "Good luck, bad luck - who knows?" So try that out.

That is so lovely. And it really made me smile when you talked about the horse coming back with all of his horse friends. I don't know why, but for some reason that just delighted me.

Yeah, me too.

"Good luck, bad luck - who knows?" Yes, thank you. So Cory, I know you have various things out in the world. You've got your new book coming out. Tell us a little bit about that and where people can find you if they want to find out more.

Yeah, so the book is titled, 'Stop missing your life: how to be deeply present in an un-present world'. That is available in almost all places that books are sold, including in the UK. And I also have a podcast called 'Practicing Human'. It's a daily podcast, 10 minute segments, similar to this. And everyday we're getting a little better at life. So that's available as a resource. But if people want free guided meditations or book recommendations, app recommendations, and even sleep meditations, you could just text your email address to the number +1 (631) 405-4631 and you'll get an automated email to your inbox that has all of those resources to really get you started on this journey of mindfulness meditation and more. So that's there as well, and that will have links to all my stuff. If you want to follow me on social media, Instagram is the best place to find me @corymuscara.

So many wonderful things to investigate. Cory, thank you so much. I wish you the best of luck with the book and I wholeheartedly recommend that everyone checks

it out. I'm thoroughly enjoying it. I wish you well with it all. Thank you so much for your time.

Thanks for having me, Katie. It was a delight.