

PART 1: CULTIVATING SELF-AWARENESS

1. How did I get here?

It's a pretty sad story of all work and no play 'Makes Jack a Dull Boy' – or in my case, a dull girl.

My company (an executive search firm called Jack Hammerget it...Jack?), my family (an amazing husband, and two most magnificent and adorable daughters), my input into entrepreneurial and philanthropic initiatives, and more (I won't bore you at this early stage of the book with my list of commitments and responsibilities), require an intense focus to keep all these balls in the air.

And by the end of 2012, I was struggling.

I was working so hard at trying to ensure that the balls were all moving in perfect synchronisation, that I was not only exhausted, but also quite miserable. And definitely not having any fun. At all.

Work was intense, I was grumpy and irritable at home, and I was pretty much dragging myself through each day, with tremendous effort and strain. Complaining and moaning. The balls stayed in the air. But I was wiped out!

And then I went on holiday. Relief. Finally, a break.

Time to think, reflect and make some decisions. The first of which was that I was not going to have another year like this. Ever again.

There was a time, not so long ago, when work was fun, exhilarating, energising. There was a time when I did not feel like a dried out wash-rag, when the hard work did not drain and sap my energy. So what happened between then and now?

And then the even bigger question – how on earth was I going to make a change? My family commitments were not going to reduce, my company and the work itself was not going to all of a sudden alter dramatically (sure, I could delegate a bit more, but the fundamentals would remain the same), and the demands of the other aspects of my life would also still be there.

I desperately wanted to experience the joy of work (and life) again!

Which led to the big realisation: The only thing that had any hope of significant change was...ME! My outlook, my approach, my perspective, my experience of MY LIFE!

Aha – an epiphany! A pretty scary one, because it meant that I needed to take the responsibility for making the change. Anything external would merely be ‘tweaks’, and would ultimately never be sustainable or have lasting impact.

As my mother would say.... ‘Oy Vey’!

So my search began. The hardest part of which was that I was not entirely sure what I was looking for.

But I had a lot of questions. Mostly around: ‘How come, in spite of all the good things happening in my life, I’m focusing on the stuff that’s mostly not great (in other words, I’m seeing the murky mud instead of the joy and light)?’ As well as: ‘I seem to be chasing goals and achievements all the time – how can I pause long enough to enjoy the journey?’ And: ‘What do I need to do to change my perceptions and experience of my life?’

Apparently, asking the right questions is the first step to finding solutions. There is a famous quote by Rilke: ‘Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves’.¹ Which sounds like a great state of being to aspire to – but for me, extremely challenging to accept. I really like solutions. Preferably quick ones.

It turns out that the questions I had started to ask had no quick fixes – but at least they lead me to my first important discovery.

Which was a book that had been sitting on my shelf for a while. Ignored, unread, gathering a bit of dust as benched books tend to do, regardless of how good the housekeeping. It had been gifted to me by my husband several months prior to my miraculous ‘discovery’, who had noted my accumulating stress, overwhelm, fatigue and general malaise and had sourced the book on my behalf.

With the auspicious title, ‘Mindfulness – Finding Peace in a Frantic World’, by Mark Williams and Danny Penman,² I had shelved it due to my self-proclaimed insistence that I was ‘handling things just fine’, and attributing my stress to the millions of balls in the air that I was juggling – to my mind, with great finesse, actually!

The initial book toss was also due to a quick perusal (I at least had to do that considering the ‘gifted’ nature of the item) where the words ‘meditation’, and ‘breathing’ jumped out at me, causing instinctive rejection. Firstly, I knew how to breathe. Secondly, I had neither the time nor the inclination to take on even one more thing in my day, especially something like ‘meditation’, which seemingly offered absolutely no productive output whatsoever.

In fact, I had tried meditation a couple of times previously in yoga classes, and found it terribly boring and frustrating. I wanted to do it ‘right’, but the yoga teacher gave only the most basic of directions, and I had no idea if I was doing the meditation successfully. Which at the time was very important to me.

So, with all of these preconceived ideas and notions, I had accepted the gift graciously (I hope), which was clearly offered with love and the best intentions, and then put it aside...for rediscovery at a more appropriate time. (You know the saying, “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear”?).

Turns out, the appropriate time was early in 2013.

I was on a red-eye flight to Johannesburg, and as I was walking out the door, I hastily grabbed a book to read on board, and shoved it in my bag. It was only when I pulled it out as we became airborne that I realised I had brought 'the book'. I rolled my eyes to myself, looked desperately for some other reading material, and with my choices being the in-flight mag and 'Mindfulness....', I surrendered to the latter.

In hindsight, I must also thank the airline for an extremely dreary airline mag. Who knows where my destiny would have lead should the magazine have offered sufficiently engaging reading. Needless to say, my fate unfolded before me as I turned the pages of what was soon to become my tome of wisdom.

By the time the flight landed, I had completed the introductory chapters, and my first Mindfulness meditation. I was hooked, and taking on the very accessible eight-week Mindfulness programme was an inevitability – the only requirement being the commitment to daily practice.

Which, let me be frank, was not entirely without its challenges. Finding time was never going to be possible. So making time for the daily meditations became a critical priority.

I guess I kept it up because I could feel the benefits almost instantly (yes, I enjoy experiencing a fast – preferably immediate, if I'm to be totally honest - connection between endeavour and reward), and because the ideas and principles of Mindfulness really resonated with me, and offered some insights to the 'life questions' I had begun to ask.