



**Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May ([mindfulinmay.org](http://mindfulinmay.org)) and The Mind Life Project ([www.mindlifeproject.com](http://www.mindlifeproject.com)) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews George Mumford**

### **George Mumford**

*George Mumford's deeply moving personal story is unforgettable. An aspiring basketball player at the University of Massachusetts, injuries forced Mumford out of the game he loved. The medications that relieved the pain of his injuries also numbed him to the emptiness he felt without the game and eventually led him to heroin. After years of making meditation on and off the cushion the centre of his life and getting clean, Mumford enrolled in Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program and collaborated with him to create the Inner-city Stress Reduction Clinic in the early nineties. When Michael Jordan left the Chicago Bulls to play baseball in 1993, the team was in crisis. Coach Phil Jackson, a long-time mindfulness practitioner, contacted Dr. Kabat-Zinn to find someone who could teach mindfulness techniques to the struggling team—someone who would have credibility and could speak the language of his players. Kabat-Zinn led Jackson to Mumford and their partnership began. Mumford has worked with Jackson and many of the teams he coached to become NBA champions. His roster of champion clients has since blossomed way beyond basketball to include corporate executives, Olympians, and athletes in many different sports*

**Elise:** Welcome, George, to the program. It has been such an amazing journey reading your book, and I can't wait to get into this conversation with you. So, thanks for being here.

**George Mumford:** Well, thanks for thinking of me. Yes. It was a lot of fun for me writing it.

**Elise:** As I said before we started recording, you are a leading global mindfulness teacher, and you've written this amazing book, *The Mindful Athlete*. After I read your book, I think I was just so deeply touched by your story. I think I would love to start from that place. I pulled a quote out of your book. The beginning of your book and the beginning of your life. So, you wrote in *The Mindful Athlete*, "I grew up in Dorchester, Boston in the '60s and '50s. Here's how The Urban Dictionary defines the place: 'A ghetto in Boston where hood rats and thugs kill each other over basketball courts, street corners, and anything else they feel like. Most people know to steer clear of this area and let the ghetto rats cull themselves out of existence.'"

I read that. It's a very stark image. I wanted to ask you if you could paint us a picture of the dominant influences or features of your childhood that ended up informing who you are and led to where you ended up and your purpose in the world.

**George Mumford:** I was fortunate enough to be involved in athletics. It kept me on the straight and narrow. So, even though there were a lot of different things going on up until about eighth grade, it seems like, before eighth grade, it doesn't matter so much; it's there. But, once you get to eighth grade, then it gets serious. I was fortunate enough to be involved in athletics. Even though my family didn't have a lot of money, they were really adamant about me getting an education, and doing the right thing, and hanging with the right people, and stuff like that. It's just realising that. I think about junior high school. I used to walk to school from there. I remember it used to be so bad after school that the police were always there. I remember this one incident, they were chasing this kid, this young man. He got in a taxi and said, "Just drive anywhere," just to elude his pursuers. It was an intense time. It was just what it was.

For me, what defined me, really, was just wanting a way out. Knowing that sports was a vehicle for me, and getting a good education. So, I hung out with Joe College and those folks. Even though I had other folks, I had a double life. I'd hang out with, cool and gang-ward guys that were doing other stuff, but not necessarily robbing people or anything like that. Just maybe liking the drink, and getting high, stuff like that. It was mostly just focused on being in athletics.

Even all my nephews that followed behind me, that was a path for all of us, is to stay involved in athletics.

**Elise:** Was that the way you had an anchor, and you stayed out of the depths of this ghetto life?

**George Mumford:** Yes. It helped that we had some amazing teams representing Boston, vis-à-vis the Boston Celtics and the Boston Bruins. Those days, it was the Boston Patriots and Boston Red Sox. Then the colleges. It was quite a college town. Being able to observe the sports. In those days, I remember my older siblings, they used to go to the Penn Relays every year. That was a big deal. Track and field was really big when I was growing up in the '50s anyway.

**Elise:** You had a lot of siblings, I remember reading in the book. Thirteen.

**George Mumford:** Thirteen of us. I had eight sisters and four brothers.

**Elise:** I think you described it like having multiple mothers in the house.

**George Mumford:** Yes. Like having seven older sisters and one mum. So, you figure it out. So, that was it, but it informed me. But, I think what informed me more, and maybe this is really important to say, even though all this stuff was happening out there, it was my family life which was a little dysfunctional with alcoholism from my father. But, it was my older sibs. There was a tradition. My older brothers and sisters would take care of the younger ones. It was having that family unit. Even though it was dysfunctional, it was enough support to keep me out of harm's way and to keep me on the straight and narrow. So, I would say especially my mum, and my grandmother, and my older siblings, they had a way of communicating. It's interesting because they come from the south. They migrated from Alabama, and they were sharecroppers. So, it was an intense environment that they came from. So, I think it was more how I was nurtured, I would say.

In those days, it was interesting because even though the neighbourhoods, we didn't go by colour or anything when I was growing up. When you're a young person out playing or whatever, whenever a grownup said something to you, you responded to them, "Yes, ma'am. Yes, sir." It was like the whole community supported each other. I remember realising my nephews never experienced that because everything changed when we got away from the

nuclear family when you have aunts, and uncles, and grandparents that live with you. It was a very different universe in those days.

**Elise:** Then another quote in your book, which I'm going to read. You write – I love this bit – “I slowly came to understand how having your arse on fire, or what I call AOF, not only moves us human beings into action but compels us to seek our truths and act with conviction in life. This pertains as much to mindful athletes as it does to anyone else.” What do you mean by your arse on fire? Can you share a little bit from your own life about what was going on at this point when you were in AOF and where that led?

**George Mumford:** I had a lot of years when I was active and doing things. It wasn't until I got to a point where I couldn't keep getting high and using drugs and alcohol, and I couldn't stop. There was a sense of urgency. Some people say your hair's on fire or whatever they may use. But, when I call it arse on fire, that means when you're in a fox hole. There's no atheist in a fox hole. You say, “God help me,” or, “Get me out of here.” It reminds me of a line. I think it's Along the Watchtower, the rendition by Jimmy Hendrix. He said, “There must be some way out of here, said the joker to the bee. There's too much confusion. I can't get no relief.” To me, that's pretty much what I mean. It's like a sense of urgency. A sense of getting to that moment of truth where you have to step off; you have to do something different. There's enough pain and enough discomfort that you can't still; you have to move. When your butt's on fire, it gets you up. You jump, and you react to it, respond to it.

Butt on fire, or arse on fire, is a metaphor for when you get to that place where you're tired of being tired. You've just had enough. You say, “Enough.” Then you find the energy to do something, to move forward. You get to that moment where you know the only way out is through. Like Robert Frost said, the only way out is always through. Some people could have their butt on fire, but they don't recognise it; they don't feel it. You just say, “How can they do that? Mustn't they feel pain?” But, they're not open to it. There's a way of denying. For me, I got out of denial, and I just felt the pain, and I knew that it wasn't sustainable. It compelled me. So, it ended up being a blessing.

**Elise:** Would you mind just painting a picture for us so that the listeners can get a sense of the really quite remarkable transformation that occurred across your life from one end to the other? You spoke openly about your addictions and

living double lives. Can you paint a little bit of a picture of how bad it was, and then maybe the turning points that changed your story?

**George Mumford:** It was really bad. For a long time, I was able to use, especially drugs, in safety, so I could just get high once in a while. I remember being in college. I'd be able to get high once in a while, or even drinking. If I had an exam or something, or just playing sports, I would just not indulge. I wouldn't do it during the season. Then after the season, I would get involved. It went like this for a while until I got to the point where it changed my personality when I got high. When I had to get high multiple times a day just to be normal, that came to be a problem. Then getting to the point where I lost my car, and I had to take public transportation, two hours each way, just to get to work and there was a part of me that knew.

Then what transformed for me, I felt like I always going to be a drug addict and alcoholic until April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984. A friend of mine I used to get high with came by and took me to an AA meeting. Then once I got to the AA meeting, I continued to use after that, but I got to a point where I got into detox, and was in the 12-step meetings. Seeing that there was a way out, really helped me a lot. Then knowing when I went into the detox, my still small voice said, "The same George that goes in, if that George comes out, you're in trouble. So, you have to be a different George when you come out of there. Well, actually, you've got to be a different George going in there. So, you have to just make that decision now. But, the George that you've been being is not the George that you need to be if you're going to get clean." So, my butt was on fire. The AOF was to the point where I had the motivation; I had the sense of urgency to say, "I have to change now." Not- "Okay. Maybe next week. I'll just get high one more time, or I'll just drink this one drink," or something like that. It was that transformation.

Then once that happened, and then I got out of the detox, I've just seen that same energy that I used to pursue, numbing myself out or self-anaesthetising myself because I had chronic pain. I didn't know that until I got clean. That's when I made the shift. Once I got in there and I started, I would say, I 'behaved' my way into proper thinking. Because all of my thinking before - because I'm looking at it from a perspective- I call that dope fiend wisdom or that crazy, not seeing clearly.

**Elise:** What do you call it?

**George Mumford:** Dope fiend wisdom.

**Elise:** Okay. Yes. As in your whole state when you're on drugs.

**George Mumford:** The crazy wisdom or something. Yes. I have on these glasses. It doesn't matter what I do. I'm still going to be behaving that way until I change my filter, or my beliefs, however you want to frame it. My paradigm. If I didn't have a paradigm shift, I'd continue to do what I was doing. So, once I put on the glasses, that was seeking the light, or seeking peace, seeking freedom, then that totally changes everything because now, I'm willing to look at things differently. I'm willing to say, "Okay. They say if you do this..." I had to act on faith and just behave until my thinking could catch up with me. So, I like to say, 'behave my way' into proper thinking.

They said, going to meetings - thirty meetings, sixty meetings, ninety meetings in ninety days. That's quite a commitment. Things like that. Some of the suggestions they made, I didn't do. They wanted me to go into a therapeutic community, or they wanted me to go into a sober house. I said, "No. I want to work." I knew I had to keep my job. That was just this understanding that if I lost a job, I'd be really lost. So, I did it by whatever means necessary to keep my job and then once I got clean, it's like, "Yeah. I'm going back to where I used to get high, and I'm going back to the old neighbourhood, but I'm going to make it work. I'm not going to take your suggestions." This is where I talk about you've got to know yourself. You've got to do what works for you. It has to be an inner direction. It can't be just some external.... They can make suggestions. If it's not in alignment with how you really feel or what you think you need to do..... what I thought I needed to do, I knew I had to sustain my job and I knew that I couldn't be in a situation like a therapeutic community where they tear you down to build you up. I just knew that if I was there, and they were telling me that I had to clean the floor with a toothbrush, and it was somebody that I didn't respect, that was a problem.

**Elise:** You knew yourself enough to know that that wasn't going to work.

**George Mumford:** Yes. Jails, and military. No. Can't go there.

**Elise:** Right. It's still quite remarkable to me because, having worked in psychiatry with addiction, so many people can't.... They'll go to detox, and they... go back, and detox, and back. It was heroin. Right? This is not a light drug.

**George Mumford:** I wore long-sleeve shirts for decades.

**Elise:** Right. Because you were working. What were you doing at the time?

**George Mumford:** I was working for the defence industry, and I had secret clearance. So, I could have lost my job. So, I wore long-sleeve shirts in the winter, the summer, because I had tracks on my arms. It was really challenging. It's transformation. Like I said, if I'm the same George that goes into detox, and then I take a hiatus for 21 days, and I come out, and I'm the same person I was before I got in there..... Then, of course, when I did come out, I did get triggered, but I knew that I could recite the serenity prayer, and pray, and then go to a meeting after work. But, when I recited the serenity prayer, the impulse, the compulsion to leave was removed from me because they say there's going to come a day when no power on earth can keep you from drinking or drugs. So, I knew that enough to do that. Then just building on that.

But it's a transformation. I had to be a different George. I had to see myself as being capable. That's when my friend that came by and when I saw that he was clean, I was like, "Well, he's like me. He's not using. How did he do that?" That triggered it.

**Elise:** That's hope and possibility.

**George Mumford:** My arse on fire part of it, now that I remember and go back to it. So in March, before I went into detox, I had a strep infection from getting high. I was walking about with 103, 104-degree temperature. But when you're dope sick, you've always got like flu symptoms but more intense, so, I went to a doctor, and they put me in a hospital. I was in hospital for a week because I had a strep infection, and it really tore me down. Then they were treating me like a drug addict. When they were cutting in my arm, they didn't want to give me any pain meds. They just treated me really inhumanely because they didn't want to give me any drugs. They didn't know much about drugs in those days.

Then when I got out, I had that.....

**Elise:** Detox.

**George Mumford:** It wasn't such much detox. Like a scare. I could have died. I was just sick all the time. I realised that I had to change. He showed up right when I was ready. That's the thing. People say it. That's why I got into psychology because I was questioning, "How was I able to do it, and not so

many other people can?” So many of my family members, friends that died, or in institutions or jails because of it. They couldn’t do it. So, I was very interested, curious about how do people motivate themselves? How do I get to a place from wanting to get high to actually getting into a process of doing it? It’s not easy. It’s challenging. It’s paradoxical, really, when you think about it. But, to me, it is about the spirit connecting with a higher power. The power source is what I like to call it.

**Elise:** Can you say more about that? I’m wondering, did religion or spirituality play a part?

**George Mumford:** Spirituality, not religion. The thing about 12 Steps is they have, “Your concept of a higher power God is on you. There’s no one way. You have to figure it out.” Usually, they say, “All you have to know is you’re not it.” During your recovery and during your devotement, your concept of God changes, or a higher power. So I used to say, there’s an electric plug, and you just plug into it. You just plug into the power source, however you want to do that. Like I said, when they told me, “No power on earth can stop me from a drink or drug,” and that is. But, there is one who has all power, and may you find him now. That is in the *Big Book*. It says right there. A basic dilemma is a lack of power. There is one who has all power. May you find him now.

My book, *The Mindful Athlete: Secrets to Pure Performance*. I talk about the five superpowers. That is really a metaphor. When I was at college, UMass Amherst, we had this power plant because it’s a big campus. The superpowers is like a power plant: it gives you access to power. So, you have to do that.

**Elise:** I was going to ask you about the five spiritual superpowers and if we could explore that a little bit. Just before we go there, I’d love you to share the turning point where you were in a job, and I’d think you’d gotten clean, but you were working in finance, so it was not your path. Then you made another big decision. Can you share?

**George Mumford:** It’s funny. It was 1989. What’s that? That’s 32 years ago when I made that decision, about a couple of weeks off, almost to the day. I was showing up. I would forget to go to meetings; I would forget to do things. Also, I was a financial analyst. I worked for this high-tech company. We were called CMass Central Massachusetts Administrative Services. I had cost centres. We’d call them a warehouse, and then you’d have a certain building. This building, MR01, MR02. Whatever it is. Then different cost centres. I was



supporting them. My boss thought that something was wrong because they never complained about me. He thought, being a finance person, you just say no to people. Yet, I had a relationship with them. We would get together, and I'd figure out what they wanted, and make it so when they asked me for something, I didn't always say no because we knew, and we had an arrangement. It had to be something they needed. So, I had a great relationship with them. It was more collaborative, not me trying to impose my will on them.

They perceived that as being that I was in cahoots with them, that I was too soft. Then they wanted me to do things, like spy on them or be a real jerk. I said, "Goes against my values. I'm not doing that." Then they were trying to force me to do it. I just said, "You know something? I'm not even in it." That was another moment my arse was on fire. I didn't want to leave because I didn't have a job, but I couldn't stay. You get to that moment of truth where you can't stay, and you can't leave.

**Elise:** I think a lot of us will relate to that. Most of us have been at that point at some point.

**George Mumford:** I had to make a decision to leave. That weekend, all I could do is breathe in, breathe out and think about it and reflect on it. At some point, I got to a point where I was able to leave. The interesting thing is, several weeks before that, I go in to see my meditation teacher, Larry Rosenberg. This is before I moved into the meditation centre. I actually lived in the meditation centre for six years. Before I moved in there, I went to my weekly interview with him, and he said to me, "What's going on?" I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You look happy today." I said, "I took a mental health day off from work." He said, "You should make a habit of that."

There were all these times. But, it got to a place where I knew I had to leave. It just was an inside thing. People were saying, "You're really good at it. Why are you leaving?" "Well, my heart's not in it." I can tell you that I knew a lot of people, hundreds of people, maybe even thousands of people. Working in finance, you deal with a lot of people. You know what everybody makes and all that stuff. A lot of people were saying, "I wish I could leave. I wish I could do what you're doing." Of course, they could, but their arse wasn't on fire. That's when I had to do it because it was comfortable. I was making good money. It was great company, but I got to a point where I had to acknowledge that my heart wasn't in it. I was just going through the motions.

**Elise:** What happened then? Where did you go from there?

**George Mumford:** I talked to them. They laid me off so I could collect unemployment. The interesting thing is, I left one job, it was in the defence industry, and moved to this high-tech industry. I had a significant increase in pay. This is the interesting thing. If you stay in the same job, you might get two, three, if you're lucky, five per cent, seven per cent, ten per cent. But, when you change jobs, they've got to pay you at fair market value. I ended up getting, what might have been, like \$200 more a week. So, that was like \$10,400 more than I was getting before. I put it all in a bank. So, I had two years of savings as well as other stuff. I moved into the meditation centre, and I gave up my apartment. I still had to pay rent in the meditation, and I still owned the house with my mum, so I still had to pay the mortgage, but I figured it out. Amazing thing is that, I remember one month, I got an insurance rebait that I never get. That was enough to cover my rent.

**Elise:** The universe was working in your favour.

**George Mumford:** The universe was colluding with me. For two years, I didn't work. I just meditated. Did a lot of sitting. I did a 90-day silent retreat, and then six weeks. Then a lot of 10-day, 12-day, 9-day retreats. Just a lot of sitting. I lived in the meditation centre, and I read a lot of books. During that time, I read over a book a week. I was really seeking, getting into it. The transformation, it was joyful for me because after being in hell, everything is heaven. Just think about being a dope fiend and having to get high multiple times a day, not knowing where you're going to get high, or having to deal with people, go to places where you wouldn't go, have people treat you like crap. I had lost my car. It was just hell. Getting out of hell meant everything. It's heaven. My mind was like, "I'm getting out of hell."

**Elise:** If you're getting out of hell, everything is heaven. Right. Okay.

**George Mumford:** To me, I felt like it was a joyful journey. I kept growing, and evolving, and getting to know myself, and understanding this mind-body. Just understanding what it means to really be free. What it means to be able to create space between stimulus and response, and in that space, I can choose who I'm going to be. I can just let my life speak for me and start to know myself. That started with knowing my mind and body, and knowing that I had chronic pain, and I had to figure out how to manage it without drugs and alcohol. The whole process of self-discovery.

Then I actually lived in the meditation centre for six years. Then actually going out and teaching people meditation who make requests. Everything was synchronistic. I quit my job. For two years, I didn't work. I went and did a 90-day retreat. I came back to the meditation centre, and there's an RFP for somebody to teach meditation and yoga in the prison and substance abuse units. I was competing with some very high-credentialed people, and I got the contract.

**Elise:** It's like full circle. It's like Steve Jobs. It all makes sense when you look back.

**George Mumford:** Yes. So, I did that. Then I remember talking to Jon Kabat Zin and I. Once I got that job, then we wrote a proposal to the criminal justice system so that we could fund it at the medical centre. Then we had a big grant. I used to write the grants. Then we got it. So, then I started working with Jon in the Centre for Mindfulness. In those days, it was the Stress Reduction Program.

**Elise:** It's incredible because we've had Jon on this program. It's so incredible. You were at that place at that time when this whole movement was really starting to seep into mainstream. You were there creating these programs. It's just phenomenal. Your story is quite phenomenal. Obviously, we haven't even gotten to *The Mindful Athlete* and your whole journey.

**George Mumford:** This is all the mindful athlete. This is all part of it. This is the whole point.

**Elise:** You've taught, as you say, CEOs, inmates, athletes. You've really taught a very wide range, everybody, really. I'd love to hear about going into prisons, and any anecdote that you have about how do you make mindfulness relevant in a prison for inmates. Then maybe we can move to working with some of the athletes, but I'm really interested in hearing about some of the prison work.

**George Mumford:** I used to go into this one. It was Bay State Correctional Institute. There was an inmate that was out on furlough, and he raped and killed somebody. That's when Michael Dukakis was running against, I don't know if it was George Bush, or Reagan, or whatever. Anyway, they created this particular prison or institution where the lifers were. So, most of my students were lifers. They were never getting out. Some of them were doing double life.

The interesting thing was, these folks that I used to go in and teach with, I used to get high with them. They're from my neighbourhood. So, I had street cred because they knew who I was.

**Elise:** Wow. What a crazy turn of events. Literally, you knew people in there that were from your street.

**George Mumford:** It was crazy. Yes. So, I'd go in there, and I had to deal with all this stuff. I won't get into the details. But, there was one prisoner. We'd be sitting in meditation. When I went in, I would go early. I went early because sometimes the correction officers would give you a hard time, and wouldn't let you in, and make you wait 45 minutes or whatever. I'd go in and oftentimes, I'd have to sweep up, and mop the floors, and set up the room before we could even do the meditation.

We're sitting, just contemplating our breath. The intercom would come on, and it would be some CO, which is correction officer (instead of prison guard, we used the word correction officer), and you hear his voice. There was a particular inmate and he said "His voice. I don't like this. It makes me angry" and all that. So, I was able to talk to them about using the intercom as a bell for mindfulness so that when you hear it, you just notice your breath: breathing in, breathing out. "I feel anger," or whatever it is. Breathing out. So that we create a space between someone's response. When they heard it, they perceived it as being a reminder to be with their object of awareness. To just stay within yourself, and just noticing the sound comes, and it goes. So, that would be one thing that I had in that experience.

Then teaching at another prison, I actually worked with the correction officers and the commissioner. Everybody went through the program. I mean, a lot of the higher-ups, everybody, because that's what we offered. We offered it not just to the inmates but to the correction officers, everyone. What happened was, the correction officers, because they know it, and they know that the guys are going through it, so if somebody has a bad letter, or Dear John letter, or having somebody pass away, because they stayed in that calm out of the hurricane and that peace, it helped the inmate to calm down as well. So, you can see how this process of just being able to create space between stimulus and response, that now you started supporting each other.

Now, when I would go into the prison, they let me right in because I knew the captain, I knew all the people because I was serving them as well. They had

issues from spousal abuse, substance abuse, gambling issues. You name it. Marital problems. So, me providing that servicing for them twice a year. Because when you work in prison, you've got to go through 80 hours of training each year to be certified. So, you had to go through that. So, we made it part of it. So, I used to work with all of them.

**Elise:** With the 'life' inmates, did they have to come? If they did have to come, how did you engage them? Why would they want to do it if they're in there? How did you help them see the relevance, or how is it relevant to them?

**George Mumford:** They were the best students. They were the students I could go in and talk about the Buddha, Christ, Muhammad. I could talk about anybody, and they got it. They used to thank me for coming in there. Because a lot of times, it could be ten years before people accepted they were in prison. These guys were never getting out. Some of them had already done 20, 30 years. Like I said, I knew a couple of them because I grew up with them or whatever. Just to go in there and just to teach them how to do time so that the time doesn't do them. See, there's a difference. We're all doing time on some level. It's not so much about external prison; it's about the internal habit patterns we have and the way we're reacting to our experience. The people, and places, and things, and ways that keep us in prison keep us reactive and keep us away from being ourselves and being able to dwell in peace and ease. To come from love, not from hate, to understand there's a difference between power and force. Where force, you've got to keep doing it, and then you get a counterforce. But, with power, it just flows. You don't have to really do anything. You just allow it to flow.

I loved going in there. I remember going in there the day after Thanksgiving. They couldn't believe that I would show up the day after Christmas. They couldn't believe that I would show up to offer them... In those days, it was voluntary, so they weren't getting good time or anything. But, they knew that they needed to do something like that, so, it was really powerful.

Then to fast-forward, I'm at the Cambridge Centre giving a talk, and one of the people in the audience is one of the inmates that I worked with when he was in prison. He was out. He was giving an art exhibit. You can't make that up.

**Elise:** It just sounds like the most meaningful, important work. What a privilege to go in and offer that. I was just thinking when you said that phrase about – I can't remember how you said it – something about doing time.

**George Mumford:** Not having the time do you. Yes.

**Elise:** Obviously, that's such an extreme situation. Outside of prison, we all battle against situations sometimes that we don't want to be in, whether it's illness or divorce. This whole piece about surrendering or accepting things as they are. When I started practising mindfulness, I didn't quite understand this idea of allowing or accepting reality as it is. To me, I was wondering, "No. I don't want to be resigned to my fate." Can you share any thoughts around that theme? What we're actually fighting. Why you should accept. Why can't you fight against it?

**George Mumford:** Well, you get tied up in a net in the water. The more you struggle, the more entangled you get. So, it's a simple thing. To me, I don't like the word sacrifice or surrender. I prefer the word generosity and being generous. I'm giving. I'm allowing. Sometimes happens. So, the whole idea of the practice of meditation, and the crown jewel we can get in the five superpowers in mindfulness. Mindfulness by itself is not enough, but it's at the heart of everything. So, what we're doing is starting to see how we behave – our words, our thoughts, and our deeds – and to see what the consequences of them are. Do they lead to peace? Do they lead to suffering?

A big part of the process is knowing what's helpful and what's not. Not judging. Robert Black talks about – especially with men – this black bag that goes behind us. It's all of these repressed, shadowy things, instead of realising that there's no bad or good, it's either helpful or not, either wholesome or not. You start to understand that everything begins with the mind. So, if your mind is right, then your thoughts, and your feelings, your actions is going to be right.

In my book, I talk about the wolves. For shortening it up, there's fear wolf and there's the love wolf. This grandfather is telling his grandson that there's this ferocious battle going on inside of him between these two wolves. The grandson gets concerned and says, "Grandfather, which one will win?" He says, "The one that I feed."

If you look at it from that metaphor, when something happens, which wolf are you feeding? We call it storehouse consciousness. We have these cosmic events or these energies. When we open a solid door, whatever, they come up. But, if you shut the solid door, both the positive and negative seeds, you don't have access to them. When you open a door, you have to differentiate between the seeds that are helping and the ones that are not. That's the whole practice is

knowing what's helpful, what's not helpful. Knowing what's leading you to peace or love or compassion and what's leading you to fear, doubt, and insecurity.

When you're in that metaphor of the fear wolf, now you're in a sympathetic nervous system: fight, flight, or freeze. We want to get in the parasympathetic. I used to call it the accelerator and the brake. I like the idea of the relax and digest for the relaxation response. But, in that space, you're in a non-linear space. You're seeing the big picture versus the words of the song. So, you understand, if you're right-handed, this is dominant. The only way you can get a word in edgewise using your whole brain is to slow it down. That's where the meditation is really helpful to slow us down. Physically, get some calm, but mentally have the space to have the acuity or the space to actually see things.

What we want to understand is, I can use this bottle. It's either half-full or half-empty. Both are right. But, if I see this half-empty, which I have the right to do and I could do that, then that puts me in fight, flight, or freeze rather than rest or digest or in growth mode or love mode.

In say football - meaning soccer rather than American football because football is big there -If you're on your heels, you can't be on your toes. On a cellular level, we're either in survival mode or growth mode. When we're in survival mode, we've got to get out of survival mode to be in growth mode to move forward, to actually be proactive instead of reacting. This stuff.

When people say, "Why do you do it?" Well, something happens, and you get to interpret what it means. That's very important. It's huge. If you have on the love glasses, it's easy for you to see what's right, what's working, versus being in reactive and just focusing on what you don't want and focusing on what's wrong. I used to call it awfulising when I got into stress management.

**Elise:** Awfulising.

**George Mumford:** You're awfulising. You're focusing on what's going to go wrong. The whole idea is to understand what you think. There's a book called *The Strangest Secret*. You know what the strangest secret is?

**Elise:** No.

**George Mumford:** We become what we think about. Emerson said, "We become what we think about all day long." If you read the bible, it talks about

‘as a man or a woman thinketh in their heart, so are they.’ That’s what we need to understand. Whenever we hold in mind, we manifest. If you think about Dr Dray, “I’ve got money on my mind,” that’s meditation. From the time we wake up to the time we go to sleep, there’s some form of meditation or contemplation going on, which is the definition of meditation, to contemplate. To contemplate means to look at closely and to look at repeatedly.

We have to start to see, “What am I thinking?” There are no neutral thoughts. We have to start to understand. Those thoughts come from belief systems; they come from whatever. We have to monitor them and be able to self-regulate them in a way that’s consistent with how we want to be.

**Elise:** How do you explain this to your students? Let’s just get specific. Let’s say someone’s having negative thoughts all day. They have a fight with their husband or wife, and they’re just, “I really shouldn’t have done that.” You get into the rumination. Is it about stopping the thoughts, or what do you do with the thought? What do you do?

**George Mumford:** That’s an excellent question. The first thing you have to do is notice the thoughts without being lost in them. That’s where the mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness is this ability to create a container where we’re able to observe experience like mirror mind. You’re just reflecting on it. But, we don’t just observe it. We embellish it. We project into it. I would say in a perceptual process, it’s a very little space where we just see the raw data. So, it’s very little. Then after that, there’s the self-interest, abstract thinking or, “What does this mean,” associative thinking, and embellishment. “Yeah. I had this. I love this.” Whatever. So, very rarely are we actually seeing things as they are in the moment because we get hung up on content and we don’t understand that content is important, but the context is more important. So, you’ve got to have content and context. For moment to moment, we need to be able to see that this is different because everything’s changed. We’ve changed. Everything’s changed. But, we have a way of looking at things as it was in the past, so we keep seeing the past, not really seeing the future.

So mindfulness is this process, which I talk about in the five superpowers, of creating space between stimulus and response so that we can allow more of that receptivity without the embellishment and all of that identification, interference, and whatever, so we can just let it speak to us in its own language. So you need faith. You need to be vulnerable to be able to just stay there and say, “Okay. This is new, and I’m going to see this with fresh eyes or beginner’s mind.”



People think, “Well, I don’t want to be a beginner.” No. Having a beginner’s mind is what the whole thing is about, so you’re able to see things in new ways.

So the training is to understand – really simple – there’s no space between stimulus and response, and that’s reactivity. That’s when the brain gets emotionally hijacked because it goes right to the amygdala instead of having the space so it can go to the prefrontal cortex and go to the middle brain where you have the memories, and you know what to do. But, when you’re stressed out, it gets frozen up. Like your computer doesn’t have enough RAM, you can’t check your email. So, you have to understand that we have to create this ability to see things. We think of it as a process where we create this big container, so whatever comes in, we can handle it. So, if I take this little teacup, and fill it with water, and take a tablespoon of salt and put it in there, it’s going to be salty. But, if I take that same tablespoon of salt and put it in a bigger container, then it doesn’t affect me as much.

So, that’s the metaphor - so we get to the place where we can relate to through our senses...whatever we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, or think, we can start to notice that it arises. There’s an object, and then there’s a knowing of the object, and there’s this idea of what we call contact.

If we talk about this pen. For me to see this pen, my eyes have to work, and there has to be a consciousness, and there has to be a direction of that. Then there’s a connection where the eye, the consciousness, and the pen meet. But then, right on, there’s this feeling: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Then from there, then there’s the labelling of what it is and then there are mental formations thinking about it. That’s what we call the five skandhas, whatever you want to call it. That’s what we do. So, we want to be able to hear something and let it speak to us without seeing it so we can nip in the original. We can elongate that process of perception. Now, we get more data, and we get more information, and we’re less reactive.

**Elise:** We’re meeting every experience in the moment with a freshness without immediately putting on our stories, and clouding the whole thing with all this stuff.

**George Mumford:** Yes. It could be good things. It could be, “Yeah. It was a great experience.” But, right now, you’ve got to just let it speak to you get the right information. That’s the process. So, I talked to them about being able to be that silent witness. Because here’s one of the things that we have as human

beings, we have this ability to step back, or what Edgar Cayce calls “set self aside”, and observe our experience a silent witness. We can observe our experience not just being silent and still, and not interrupting or projecting, but we can be that witness with the intelligence, knowing what we’re looking for. It’s okay to be mindful, but what are you being mindful of?

So, you need mindful and wisdom. Wisdom can be information. It could be a rational mind of our intellect, using that. Then the third thing is direct experience or intuition. So, from moment to moment, we need to have the mindfulness, the mirror mind, but we have to know what we’re looking for and understand what the essentials are. Sometimes, we don’t know what the essentials are, but by watching, it becomes clear. It’s many, many times because we’re stitching things together. It’s not like we see the whole thing. We see a little bit, then we go over it again and see a little bit more.

I’ll give you an example. My book. I’ve read it about 44 times. Each time I read it, I get something else. Every time I teach a class – especially The Mindful Athlete class – or I want to do something, I review it. It’s the same with other books. I read them multiple times. Each time I read them, I get a little bit more. So, I’m stitching things together. You might see it as a jigsaw. When you’re doing a jigsaw puzzle, you’re growing through, and you say, “I know that. I’ve seen that piece.” Mindfulness helps with the memory; it helps with seeing clearly. Then you put the pieces together, and then you get the full picture of what that puzzle is about. Sometimes you can get it before you get all the pieces because you get the concept. Then once you do that, then you put that aside, then you get another one.

So, it’s about transforming our mind and collecting intelligence and data of how things are working and how we need to relate to things in ways where we can be present. We can see how we need to make these adjustments in real-time to keep us present, in the moment, but also thinking about what we’re doing and how we can bring more peace, more harmony, more ease. So, we’re more for life and inclusion rather than just being in tunnel vision or feeling like everything’s a struggle and there’s a scarcity so we have to fight for anything instead of seeing it as abundance. All of those metaphors: half-full, half-empty; fear wolf, love wolf. All of those things are ways of talking about this process that people can understand. That’s what I do in my book.

Elise: You’re teaching a skill that helps people to see what’s going on in their mind and notice, “Am I in the fear wolf or the love wolf?” Meeting reality in a

way that's helpful, and moving you towards what you want. As we come to the end of this conversation, I wanted to just take a few moments to explore.... You've worked with some of the world's top athletes, like Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal. Can you just share how this training has helped them? They're already brilliant and up there. So, why were you brought in, and what did you teach them that helped?

**George Mumford:** In the summer of 1993, I was working at the medical centre in the stress reduction relaxation program with Jon Kabat Zinn. It was called The Centre for Mindfulness. One of the things he used to do is he used to go to a spiritual centre called Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. He used to do training for healthcare providers, like social workers and what not and it was several days. During the same time, he was doing that training, Phil was engaged in this program called Beyond Basketball. Now they call it Fantasy Weekend. They go, and they play basketball, and he teaches things. He was doing it and one of his teammates from the New York Knicks died of a heart attack, so, he did it as a way of raising money for the family. So, they would go. So, Phil was there doing his thing.

**Elise:** Who's Phil? For the listeners.

**George Mumford:** I'm sorry. Phil Jackson. He was the coach of the Chicago Bulls at the time. He was talking to Jon. He was sharing with Jon that he needed somebody to come in and work with the team and help them deal with the stress of success. They had just won three interim championships in a row. He called me up. I think it was July, or shortly after they won the championship. In the interim, Michael Jordan's father got murdered, and Michael retired. I got that they were in a full-blown crisis.

Phil is one of those guys. He's always looking at how to help his players. He sees them as whole people. How to help them with this struggle of having everybody coming at you and reading the press? It's just a lot of stress involved.

**Elise:** Stress of success. Can we win again?

**George Mumford:** That's part of it as well. Also, when you win, you've got people coming after you. They want you to do all of these appearances and stuff. You have less time to train, and you've got a bullseye on you because everybody wants to beat you because you're the new standard. Every game is

not just a game; it's a battle because people want to win. Some get to keep their job because they were able to beat the best team and stuff like that.

That's how I got into it. When I work with people, I usually ask them two questions: What do you want? Who do you need to be to get what you want? Because you can't be who you're being and do what you want if you're not doing it. It's real simple. The process is the same. Identify the fear wolf and the love wolf and that space between stimulus and response. How to keep making wise decisions. In that space, you have to be consistent with what your core values are and what your worthy goal or your worthy cause is, if you want to win a championship, you want to play a certain way, whatever. Those decisions, that process that we come up with, have to be consistent with that, which also includes positive self-talk, not negative self-talk.

You've got to change it, so your self-talk has to be in alignment with what you say you want to do and who you say you want to be. We don't think about that. We just go, and we think that the mind is going to figure things out when in actuality, we have habit patterns, and some of them are helpful, and some are not. We have to figure out how to keep feeding the love wolf, keep getting more wisdom and intelligence about how the universe works and whether we're in alignment with that lawfulness or not. Does that make sense?

Some people get upset because they want me to tell all the details. Here's the challenge. Even if I'm working with the same team, which I was for five years, each year is different. Even if you come back with all the same players, it's going to be different. But, it never comes back with all the same players. Things change. Rules change. The opposition changes. When you win a championship, some people go other places, make more money, and then you get new people coming in. Or, you've got an expansion draft, and you can't protect certain players. All of these things factor in. Then somebody gets injured, and then they're not. There are so many variables.

The best thing we could do is understand how to be present, and how to create space between stimulus and response, how to have a goal, or to have something, and then allowing it to happen. I think you alluded to that before about me, as I get more in this practice. It's about me forming an intention and allowing things to happen instead of trying to make them happen.

**Elise:** So much to talk about. Could be hours more, but I think our time's nearly come to an end. Just last couple of very quick questions. You've read

lots and lots of books. You said that you used to read a book a week. What are a couple of standouts? What's that? 'A' booklist?

**George Mumford:** Yes. I have it for you. I can send it to you.

**Elise:** A couple of books that stand out for people that are on this self-exploration and looking at how to change mindset. What couple of books would stand out?

**George Mumford:** It's interesting because several years ago, I was giving a presentation for Lululemon. It was like 1,000. There were three presenters, and we all had 20 minutes, then we had 20 minutes of Q&A. In my Q&A, they asked me what book would I recommend because I read so many books. Out of the blue, the bible came up. Bible just came up. I said, "Whoa. That's interesting." I didn't expect that one, but it came out. It could be the Book of Mormon. It could be whatever. If you go to a hotel, you've got it. You don't have to go get it. There are a lot of lessons in there that are consistent. There's mindfulness in the bible. "A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways." "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." I talked about "ask". Seek and knock. "Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and it shall be open to you." What it's really saying is, we have this power to co-create what we hold to mind manifest.

It depends on where you are and what you're interested in. There are, obviously, mindfulness books that you can read. *Satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realisation* by Analayo. *The Noble Eightfold Path* by Bhikkhu Bodhi. There's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* by Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Of course, there's Jon's book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. *Full Catastrophe Living*. Phil's book, *Sacred Hoops*. *Eleven Rings*.

What helps me is the existential approach. There's *The Way of Man* by Martin Buber. *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm. Right now, I'm dealing with Erich Fromm's book, *A Man For Himself*. Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*.

**Elise:** I love the existentialists.

**George Mumford:** There's *Three Laws of Performance* which is by Steve Zaffron and David Logan. There's *Psycho-Cybernetics*. These are the ones that I use a lot. *Man's Search for Meaning*. *Discovery of the Presence of God*. David Hawkins has a bunch of books. I'll give you names of people like David Hawkins, Neville Goddard. This is Neville: *Immortal Man*; *Awakened*

*Imagination*. Let me see. Mark Thurston, *The Paradox of Power*. There are a lot of books.

**Elise:** I feel like that's enough to occupy the listeners .

**George Mumford:** Actually, I ordered your book today because I looked at it, and you were talking about the neuroscience. I'm looking at the books I ordered in the last week or so. Your book, obviously, *The Happiness Plan. Born to Win*. Let me see. What else here? Then there's *How to Win*. I got that. I'll share this. It used to be Brain Pickings. It's something else now.

**Elise:** Marginalia, she's changed it to.

**George Mumford:** Yeah. I got a lot of books that I read there. *How to Win*. The book I get from her thing but I think the main philosophy that I've been listening to, David Hawkins has a ton of books. Neville Goddard. Edward Casey. That sort of thing. I'll just leave it at that.

**Elise:** Wonderful. I've got one for you, not that you asked. Have you read, *The Future is Faster Than You Think?* It's not mindfulness, but it's brilliant.

**George Mumford:** No. I read a lot of quantum physics books. Didn't mention any of those. *The Future is Faster Than You Think*. I'll check it out.

**Elise:** By Peter Diamandis. I've read it a couple of times. It's fantastic.

**George Mumford:** *The Future is Faster ...*

**Elise:** Than You Think.

**George Mumford:** Sure. *Faster Than You Think*. Okay. That's why I just said the bible because there are so many books.

**Elise:** One final question. A life lesson that you've learned or earned that you would share with your younger self.

**George Mumford:** That's a good question. I think about that all the time. You are a masterpiece. You have Buddha nature, Christ consciousness. You have everything you need to succeed.

**Elise:** Beautiful. George, thank you so much. It's been a wonderful conversation. I feel like there are so many more directions it could go. For the listeners that want more, I'll be sharing your links and your book, *The Mindful Athlete*. Just wishing you well. Thank you so much for the inspiration that you

provide just through being you, and through your story, and your contribution to the world.

**George Mumford:** Well, thank you for having me on your program. I really appreciate who are you and your adventurousness in terms of just following your heart and doing what you feel moved to do, even though you had trained to do something else. That training comes with you. You don't lose it. It gets factored into your being and how you see things. I want to congratulate you.

**Elise:** It does. It makes sense for all of us backwards, I think.

**George Mumford:** Yes.

**Elise:** Wishing you well. Thank you very much.