



## John Christopher: On well-being

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Dr. John Christopher is a psychotherapist, consultant, coach, and scholar who is an internationally recognized expert in well-being. John is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and former President of the Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (Division 24 of the APA). He has received numerous awards including a Fulbright Scholar Award and the Sigmund Koch Early Career Award by the APA. John is also a Fellow of the Mind and Life Institute. Before going into private practice full-time, John was a Professor for 23 years at Dartmouth, the University of Washington, Montana State University, and the University of Guam. For over twenty years he has assisted health care professionals and the general public in cultivating self-care and preventing burnout and has pioneered the application of mindfulness training to graduate education of counselors and psychotherapists.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: *John, you're very interested in well-being and embodiment.*

John: I am, Serge. I've spent a lot of time, I guess really most of my life now, I think wrestling with that question. I wouldn't have framed it that way in the past but it's becoming clear that, that has been part of the issue. In much of my earlier scholarship, I was looking at Western theories of well being and flourishing and critiquing them from a cross cultural and historical perspective. They seem to me to be as much a restatement of individualism as they were some objective scientific truth. I was in particular looking at the way that many of these theories of well-being really neglected aspects of life that were central both to non-Western traditions but also to earlier periods in Western history. For instance, current Western theories put a strong emphasis on emotional satisfaction. When you look cross culturally, it's not that that's unimportant but that (emotional satisfaction) gets trumped by so many other virtues or ways of being a good person. Typically, human beings have lived in some sort of world view or understanding of the cosmos that gave their life meaning. Their role was to fulfill the position in life that they were born into. Meaning came from doing that as well as possible.

Serge: *Let me maybe see if I'm getting you.*

John: Sure.

Serge: *In a way, when we talk about well-being, it's one of these things that seem so obvious: Everybody knows what we're talking about. You're pointing out that actually, there is an implicit definition in a Western society of what well-being is. That implicit definition is something that tends to be more individualistic. There are other ways to conceive of it.*

John: That's right.

Serge: *Paying attention to that gives other dimensions that may not be as individualistic.*

John: That's right, exactly. For long time, I guess I had been trying to live out on a personal level a different understanding of well being that's partly based on my commitment to my own spiritual practices, hatha yoga and meditation in particular. The idea or the task of formulating an alternative to some of these Western notions just seemed too daunting. And so I have been putting it off for years. It feels like the time is getting very close to articulate an alternative. So let me focus on two pieces or aspects that seem related. The first has to do with an alternative to the dominant stance in much of the West that emphasizes control and mastery over one's life with the goal of maximizing positive experiences and minimizing negative feelings and negative experiences. One of the contributions, well that's not the right word, but one of the features that is so significant outside of our own current time period is a notion that well-being has to do with spiritual surrender.

Serge: *Interesting. I want to catch up a little bit. First, you were talking about your practice - - Hatha yoga and meditation - - wanting to make sense of that. The experience and the practice are there. In a way, you have lived what you may not yet have been fully expressing in intellectual terms.*

John: That's right.

Serge: *What I'm noticing there is, there is a primacy to experiencing and living it before formulating a theory. As opposed to defining your well-being from an intellectual perspective and then putting this into practice. You have chosen to practice life as it obviously made some sense to you, and then to reflect on this practice.*

John: That's right.

Serge: *The first point you're making is: You're noticing that this practice is one that is at odds with the Western thinking of achieving mastery over things, in contrast to surrendering.*

John: That's right, yes. I think that shows up in a number of ways. For instance, in hatha yoga, one is ... I mean, there are many different styles but in the approach that I was taught, I think a more traditional approach, one is learning how to hold a posture, an asana, with the least amount of effort possible. In a sense, you're putting yourself in a difficult or stressful or awkward situation and then learning how to find ease in the midst of that. And that comes from learning how to let go

and learning how to differentiate internally what parts of us, what muscles to be more specific, are facilitating maintaining the position and which other parts aren't necessary. And then learning how to release or let go of those things that aren't helping to maintain the pose. I think that was an initial awareness of it. I think another way that ...

Serge: *Let me stop you here. What I'm hearing is what happens in the practice of going to a pose - - which is something not ordinary and a bit of a stress in some sense. Instead of "efforting" through it... You're doing something difficult, but you're not trying to find a difficult way... You are actually trying to ease into it. Trying to find the way that works more naturally for the muscles to hold it with less effort.*

John: That's right. After college, I spend a couple of years helping to start an ashram, a spiritual community in the Ozark Mountains that was based on a yogic lifestyle. We were lucky to start working very closely with several Native American healers. We began to do sweat lodge ceremonies on a regular basis. The Native Americans sweat lodge taught me a lot about this because you're going into a completely dark container, like an igloo but made of willow branches and originally hides but now, it's tarps. And then bringing in very, very hot rocks into the sweat lodge--It's done as a sacred ceremony—and then sealing the structure up and putting hot water on the rocks. It becomes extremely hot in there. It's so hot that one tends to end up putting your face very close to the ground, because right on the bottom, there's maybe half of an inch where it's a little cooler. Again, it's a process of humbling oneself and really having to let go because it can be so hot that our normal sense of what we can endure can't get us through that. You reach a point, I reached a point, of just having to completely let go. Because otherwise, we'd run out of the sweat lodge and disrupt the whole ceremony. Yet, there's something amazing about transcending one's sense of what one can endure. It leads to powerful transformation and brings about a deep sense of peacefulness and harmony with what exist.

Serge: *What you're describing is transcending your limitations, going beyond what you normally could endure. This going beyond is not through straining and pushing, but actually finding a way to let go into it, or having to let go into it.*

John: Exactly. I've been fortunate over the years. One of the things I like to do for fun is to seek out traditional healers and shamans around the world, and spend time with them. Not that I can even begin to comprehend all of what they're up to, but I find being in their presence to be just very meaningful and rewarding. I've spend a lot of time with shamans in Bali. Their whole orientation to life is based on spiritual surrender. For them, our lives get out of balance when we are forgetting that there are bigger realities that exist, and forget how to harmonize with things that are deeper and bigger and more powerful than the individual and our own ego-driven sense of purpose or desire. For the Balinese, this has a very metaphysical and spiritual dimension in terms of the gods and goddesses operating through human beings and also with the idea that human beings exist on multiple levels of reality at the same time, and learning how to surrender to these other forces. I think whether or not that

metaphysics make sense, it left me with a deep appreciation for the importance of the notion that when life gets really challenging of not trying to impose my will upon things but learning in a sense again, how to surrender--to see what is life seeming to want from me at this moment, or what is needing to move through me.

Serge: *I want to stay there a little bit. Because when you say "surrender", for many people, the word "surrender" is going to have a certain flavor. On the other hand, what you are actually talking about is a different sense of "surrender": You're talking about "what needs to go through me" or "what does life demand of me", or "what's my interaction with life".*

*In the traditional understanding of "surrender" that we have, there is "I" and there is something bigger than me that's crushing me. As "I" am crushed, "I" have to abjectly surrender. Very clearly, there's a sense of two separate things. "I" am small, and surrendering to the big thing is a defeat.*

John: Yes.

Serge: *In the model that you're describing, it's about what needs to go through me, or what does life demands of me, or what's my interaction with the universe. It's actually a dance, it's really a collaboration, as opposed to being a surrender in a traditional sense.*

John: Yes. That's a lovely way of putting it, Serge. I think that the way we've been talking about it. It makes it also sound like... We're dealing with external versus me, me versus something external. Actually, I think where spiritual surrender has shown up the strongest for me is more dealing with my internal experience. For instance, learning how to cope with a painful separation from my ex-wife. When that first happened, part of all of this experience with both my own yoga and meditation practice but also with native American and Balinese healers made me realize that what I needed to do was to really sit with what was happening internally. The sense of grief and terror and fear was just simply overwhelming. I would though ... I knew enough from these other practices to know that trying to avoid it or trying to control it and make it go away was not the solution. It was instead actually learning to sit with and really fully go into all of its anxiety, all of the error, all of the dread. During this period, I would meditate a couple of times a day at least and really try to embrace and go into the depths of the intensity internally.

Serge: *Of course, just hearing you describe it that way, it sounds easy, like, "Oh, I just meditate on this." But it's at those moments where most of us actually are so bent on avoiding it... Just not even being aware... We have all this mechanisms to escape that...*

John: Right.

Serge: *To not stay with it. To not be able to bear it.*

John: Mm-hmm. Exactly. In that moment, I felt like my life was really in jeopardy, that these internal feelings were so powerful. Initially, I was actually feeling quite suicidal. Over time, I learned how to bear and to tolerate those feelings and to allow them to move through me in their own way and their own timing. I think to me, that's really what I mean by surrender and letting things be.

Serge: *We have, in a way, "John-of-now". If "John-of-now" could speak to "John-of-14-years-ago", when he going through that struggle: What would "John-of-now" be able to tell "John-of-then" to ease a little bit that moment? To invite him to make it more possible for him to go into this process?*

John: That's a great question, Serge. I think the John of 14 years ago was actually doing a pretty good job of it. It was probably the John of junior high school and high school that could have used some of that advice. Because that was really a rather dark time where I was going through an existential crisis. I was too terrified to really fully feel it, and I just didn't have the resources at the time.

Serge: *What would the "John-of-now" say to the "John-of-high-school"?*

John: I think at that point Serge, I was too terrified of what was happening in my body. I had existential crisis in like 6th and 7th grade where I really struggled to find meaning in life. This was the ... I was born in '62, so this was around '72 when as I was coming to awareness of a larger external world, there were lot of really very difficult things happening at the time with Vietnam and then Watergate and the growing awareness of the environmental degradation that was occurring. Those things profoundly shook me and I didn't have much sense of optimism that the human condition was getting better, or that the adults in the world really knew how to address these issues. I think I responded in a more intellectual cognitive way of searching for meaning and trying to figure that out with my mind. Which wasn't all bad, and I think I'm still doing that to some degree. I think that the despair that I was experiencing, though, was in my body and I didn't have the tools to really host that despair, and to integrate it. Really, it was only later that I've learned how when things get really intense to stay with what's happening in my body and experience it there--as opposed to letting the energy of these strong and dark and powerful emotions just fuel a racing mind that doesn't stop and doesn't rest.

Serge: *I certainly can identify with this. That sense of: We tend to identify with our mind or intellect, our ability to make sense of things. The more dire the situation, the more the sense of urgency about comprehending the situation, understanding it, making sense of it. With the idea that the making sense of it is going to give us the tool to actually change it or control it.*

John: Exactly.

- Serge: *What you're talking about is the shift from identifying with our logic, with our rational mind or the capacity to understand things. To see ourselves as a mind-body-whole-organism through which stuff is flowing.*
- John: That's right. Yeah. Some of the more recent theoretical work by people like Antonio Damasio or Mark Bickard or Alan Shore that are talking about the way that the origins of the self are really in the body, in somatic and affective experience. Freud made some similar point as to the importance of the body. I think that to me this has become really critical in terms of moving away from an over identification with a Cartesian "I", the thinking, rational part of us, and realizing that there's a deeper part of us that's more in the body. This of course, links up nicely with Gendlin's work on the felt sense.
- Serge: *I'm reflecting on what you were sharing about your struggle as a ten-year old. It feels like a similar situation to what you were describing with the sweat lodge. It's about trying so hard to solve things with the tool you have (and I certainly can identify with that), to the point where it's impossible. Then, there is a break down. Just the same way as resolving a koan. You try so hard to resolve it in a logical way, until you realize you can't. Then, you have access to another mode of understanding. It feels like... These episodes have that quality of going through the experience in order to let go of the old way of confronting and handling experience. Because you hit the limitation. Then, you get to something else.*
- John: Yes, exactly. There's a funny story when I first met one of the Balinese shamans that I've now known for about 20 years and worked with. He looked at me and then he really looks at you where he looks into your eyes and sees everything, like deeply into your soul. There's a vague sense of, "Oh, maybe I should put up a little wall or barrier." Then, the realization that that's not going to help. This guy can just break walls. He looks at me and then he starts laughing and he points at my head and he spins his finger around in a circle to indicate that my head is just spinning. And he was right. At that point, I'd already been practicing body centered practices for 10 years and yet, I was still very much in my head. I spent the better part of the summer walking around in rice paddies bare foot to try to learn how to get back into my body and feel grounded.
- Serge: *Yeah. It's not part of our basic experience of the world, or basic learning. We have to work at it.*
- John: Yes. At least not in the contemporary West and I think increasingly probably around the world as a whole. The dual things about letting go, practicing spiritual surrender on the one hand, and working with the primacy of the body on the other, have been very important in fleshing out my sense of the missing elements of well being. I mean, I don't want to say that there's not a place for more Western approaches because in some ways, those originated historically for good reasons to cope with cultural orientations to life that may be over-emphasized spiritual surrender and compliance with social systems that weren't just or contained abuses or were overly patriarchal.

There's important reasons that the American revolution and the French revolution occurred. In some ways, Western notions of well being really draw in that spirit of emancipating the individual from what society expects and letting the person come to their own sense of what their life should be about: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. At the same time, I think we've thrown out something really important which many of these traditional societies have emphasized which is learning to let be and sometimes adapt to existing realities.

Serge: *It's interesting. I'm glad that you've put it in these terms. Because, if we put it in political terms: it's why a revolution was justified. Because we're then talking about oppression. And then oppression goes together with surrender. Because that's what oppression wants you to do: To surrender to that power. Then obviously, it makes a lot of sense to be individualistic, to rebel, to refuse surrender.*

But it's not surrender in general that you're talking about. It's surrender to what? What you're pointing out in your examples as the quality of surrender is not to surrender to a master, but surrender to a vision of the universe in which you have a role. That is actually enhanced by participating in the universe, by letting go of the things that prevent you from participating as fully as you can.

John: Exactly.

Serge: *And the criticism of rational logic is not that it's bad: Just that, if you only are limited to it, you're not playing with a full deck. So the idea of surrender is just about opening up, and seeing more than the small part.*

John: Right. We have been talking about this in more phenomenological terms. I think we can flip our theoretical lens and use more of a scientific-physiological frame to look at some of these same things as well. In a sense, if we think about a stance of control and mastery versus one of openness to experience and letting go, or letting be, or surrendering to it, this links up interestingly with the physiology of stress. In other words, when we go to a place of letting go, letting be or openness to experience, it is a stance that I think is linked to a more balanced, parasympathetic autonomic nervous system state. Whereas control and mastery seem to be more linked to a sympathetic nervous system state, or a fight-or-flight response. So it sort of draws on a sense of identity of me vs the world, or my "in" group versus some "out" group.

Serge: *I want to stay a little more on that part.*

John: Sure.

Serge: *I'm not sure I'm in the same boat fully as where you are. When you're talking about the control, the mastery, being more in sympathetic activation. I see just there's a lot of energy going there. The energy is used into holding a tight grip.*

John: Right.

Serge: *In a way, that energy is not flowing, and the optimal use of sympathetic energy, a fight-and-flight system is actually that it's used to flow, so that you can have perfect strength for attack or for running away. The holding, it's actually something where the energy keeps circulating inside. And you have an implosion inside as opposed to putting that energy to circulate that energy into action in the world. Is that what you're talking about?*

John: Yes. Similarly, we tend to think about the stress response, a sympathetic nervous system state, fight-flight, as largely about threats in the external world. It can also be about threats in our internal environment. If we live our lives out of our head with the goal of maximizing positive experiences and avoiding negative experiences, (whether we do that explicitly as a philosophy of life, or whether we just pick that up culturally like most of us have and operate out of that implicitly), then there's a way in which we can become hyper-vigilant towards what's actually happening in our internal world, what's actually happening from the neck down. Then, we try to compensate with adding in more strategies of control over what's going on, or through distraction, denial and acting out. That ends up perpetuating again the activation of the sympathetic nervous system state.

Serge: *Even actually your choice of word when you start to say that we are vigilant about what's happening. The vigilance is already part of that activation.*

John: That's right.

Serge: *Because it's not a flowing quality. It's not a gentle observing. There is that tightness about it.*

John: Exactly. The tightness is the critical thing. When that's happening, we're spending more of our life in a contracted state than we should. One of the things that we've started learning from the physiology of stress, and Robert Sapolsky's work in particular, is that the more time we spend in a sympathetic nervous system state (described physiologically) or the more time we spend in a vigilant state (described more phenomenologically), the worse our health is. The sympathetic nervous system as he described it is designed to be turned on for those really dire emergencies and then turned off. We leave it on far too much of the time, and this is linked to the epidemic proportions of the illnesses of modernity.

Serge: *It's living in crisis. Basically, the permanent crisis, instead of the permanent revolution. There was a permanent crisis that we have at a gut level day in and day out.*

John: If we think instead about, like going back to what I talked about initially with a yoga pose... If we can learn how to find a place of ease in the midst of difficulty, so that we're not adding more tension, more contraction on to what's already a challenging position...

Serge: *Let me just take that as a... use it as a metaphor... what you described as in the yoga pose as a metaphor that's applicable to life. That we're going to tend to go*

*through life with a lot of crises because we're Westerners and we tend to perceive life in these terms. As we're in the midst of any of these things, maybe that little observing part that's noticing can say: "In a way, I'm in a pause. I'm in one of these moments where my dance with the universe, my dance with the world, my dance with what I perceive, is to experience myself as being in crisis.*

*When I'm experiencing myself this way, I tend to tense up. If you're noticing and pay attention to the energy at an embodied level, not just as a ... In a way, just the same way as in yoga, you pay attention to your muscles, that sense of what's happening inside. With a gentle awareness that it would be nice to actually let the energy flow a little bit and release it. As opposed to being so tense in that crisis mode of vigilance and holding tight and striving, so that we flow through the energy instead of trying to control it.*

John: Yes. That's really nicely put, Serge. Sometimes, that actually means going into the heart of these very difficult emotions that we've been trying to avoid. But they are ultimately survivable. Extreme anger, extreme rage, extreme despair, extreme grief. They're actually easier to bear when we fully experience what these things are like. When we go deeply into them, they seem to move through us more quickly. In that stance then, basically what we're doing, whether it's a yoga pose that's challenging or whether it's a difficult life experience that brings some of these so-called dark emotions with them, is that we're bringing the parasympathetic nervous system online in the midst of a situation that would normally lead to even more sympathetic nervous system activation.

Serge: *As you describe it this way, I'd like to paraphrase it a little bit. When you say that the sympathetic activation and the parasympathetic system online. I imagine that we go through something that's difficult. And not only is there a difficulty, the pain, the difficulty in making room in the body for the experience, the physical experience of the emotion. There is also the fear of going into something that is difficult. Hence, the parasympathetic is the fear of fear itself or the fear of the sensation. The fear of the experience.*

John: That's actually the sympathetic.

Serge: *The sympathetic... I mean, the sympathetic. The parasympathetic would be like the gentle mentor, the parent, the mentor, the friend who says, "Hey, you know what? This is okay." The parasympathetic is there to calm down that fear. It says: "You know... It's part of the human condition. That kind of pain, it seems so intense, but you're going to be okay."*

John: Yes. That's such a lovely point. Ideally, we learn about these things from our parents or family members or a caring community that holds us while we're experiencing the pain of a skinned knee or the pain or heart break, or frustration of this or that. So many of us don't get that anymore.

Serge: *We're talking about, in a way, that emotional literacy.*

John: That's right. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott back in the 40's noticed this and said that when we don't have the right holding environment, we precociously abandon our body and go up into our head to try to cope with life. We precociously overly develop more cognitive faculties and we abandoned the somatic and affective core of who we are in order to track the threats in our external world. This leads to what he called the false self.

Serge: *So that's where we're coming back to where we started with that sense of well-being as embodied experience.*

John: And really, the precursor and precondition for well-being is a sense of safety and security. This becomes really interesting because it links together all sorts of things that we tend to treat separately. Obviously, attachment theory and Winnicott's work in object relations theory have also focused on the importance of safety and security. We can start to now link these theories to the physiology of stress and realize that when we don't have safety and security, we spend too much of our life in a vigilant state. The vigilance is sometimes directed externally and sometimes, internally. The more time we spend in a vigilant state, the more time our sympathetic nervous system is over activated and that compromises our physical health. I think this make sense of some of the recent work on social disparities and health.

We're finding, like with Michael Marmot's Whitehall study and studies since, is that if you're not at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, your health is compromised at pretty much all levels including your mortality rate. The further down the hierarchy you are, the worst your health is going to be. Interestingly, the at least initial ways that this finding was interpreted was that people at the top had a greater sense of being in control. I think that that's actually a very Western way of interpreting those results.

If you flip this upside down, what it might mean is that, being in control might make sense in individualistic society as a way of feeling safe and secure. But there are actually many ways of feeling safe and secure including being part of an extended family (which is becoming something rare in Western modern societies), or living in a universe that seems meaningful, or has a cosmic structure that holds us, or having religious faith, or even being in a society that provides a social safety net, so that if one becomes unemployed or has a sick child, one doesn't have to worry that one's life is going to fall apart.

Serge: *I want to tweak a little bit what you're saying. Saying something very similar, but in a slightly different way. You're pointing out that the traditional interpretation of this kind of study is that people on the upper end of the scale have more control. You say, no, it's more about safety. I think the tweaking, the interesting part, is that safety is something that is not controllable. The only variable to have is control. So we focus on that. Actually, by focusing on that, we distort what it is that we need to pay attention to. Because what the organism response to is the sense of feeling safe or not safe. Of course, to some extent, focusing on control is going to be effective to increase, in some conditions, the sense of safety. But,*

*actually, confusing the two leads to trouble. The point is actually to say that while, that there is a value to control, the ultimate point is the experience of safety.*

John: Yes and then safety becomes an interesting metric or index for starting to reevaluate how we live as a society. Because, if safety and security are central to well-being--which isn't a new point, I mean Maslow made that point as well--if it is at the core of what can be called autonomic regulation (the ability for our nervous system to spend the least amount of time in a strong sympathetic nervous system state), then we need to maybe look at... and if in fact our mortality, our lifespan is dependent on the degree to which we feel safe and secure in the world versus the amount of time we spend in a vigilant state, then, it make sense to start to look at our society through the lens of safety and security. How much do we provide this for people?

At one level, we can talk about it in terms of families and parenting, and trying to help parents provide more of a safe and secure base for their children. And that's critically important. But parents can only provide what they themselves have experienced. It seems like that when you look critically, particularly at American society maybe versus some of the European societies, we have not provided the same kind of social safety nets for people. And we have far too many neighborhoods that are dangerous, where once you step out of your apartment, in too many inner cities, you have to be vigilant, you have to be looking over your shoulders all the time.

For many there aren't places where one can experience this letting go or letting be or openness or surrender. Yet, that is something that we all need and it's critical to our well-being. So this becomes an interesting way of critiquing our society and asking, exploring, how might we develop social policies that really try to take seriously the idea that we all need to feel safe and secure more than we do. In fact, the high cost of our health care system, one could argue is largely linked to the fact that too many of us spend too much time being vigilant.

Serge: *The interesting part is that we're no longer just talking about safety in the extreme situation of life or death.*

John: That's right.

Serge: *We're talking about the moment by moment experience of safety. To the extent that it's so prevalent that sense of vigilant and that sense of not being safe that we don't even notice it on a moment by moment basis. That moment by moment experience of lack of safety is, of course, what create stress even among those of us who are relatively privileged. Of course, it's even worse among people who live in a more disfavored kind of environment. Then, it becomes a question of not just looking at the cost of major illness, but essentially to say that society is not functioning optimally. Because an enormous amount of the resources are wasted through dealing with the stress, that sense of lack of safety.*

John: That's right. That's exactly right. The health of our nation is ranked something like 37th in the world, which is really rather appalling given what we spend on health. Until we address the root causes of perhaps some of the health conditions that we face--which is that again, we're spending too much time in a sympathetic nervous system state or, in other words, we're spending too much time being vigilant and don't feel safe and secure and sort of held by life, by society--we're going to continue to be ranked poorly.

Serge: *Interestingly enough, there's a whole paradigm there. You and I have our understanding of what feeling safe means. To a lot of people, the idea of safety feels like coddling people. Or the idea of performance is equated with the idea of difficulty with effort, with that concept of survival of the fittest. Of course, there is a value to it. For instance, the training of the navy SEALs, where you take the people who are the most able to overcome the most rigorous type of situation. There is a certain value to this if you want to find the toughest people. But, for society to function optimally, there is also a need for safety, and safety not being equated with mollycoddling. Maybe there is a sense of communicating a different sense of what safety means.*

John: Yes. That's a really nice point. I think that that will take ongoing work to flesh out. In some ways, it gets back to this idea of really being able to bear our experience. To be aware of it, and accept it. This is you know, of course, what mindfulness is about. To do that requires, again, a sense of safety.

Serge: *It's interesting. Because just as you start describing it this way, there is a dimension of safety that gets more similar to what it's like to practice an extreme sport. Less frightening to people who fear safety as coddling people. You're saying: In order to be better able to bear the unbearable, safety is going to help you do that. We're talking of almost like practicing the extreme sport and going into high performance. Under these conditions, yeah, you can perform better.*

John: I'm glad you made that connection, because there is a way that when life becomes really difficult, whether we're dealing with chronic pain or an emotional experience that is incredibly challenging, it does require that courage of a top athlete or a Navy SEAL to be able to really go into that experience without disconnecting from it. There's a kind of courage and being willing to really fully enter into what life brings to us.

Serge: *Courage and, in way, encouragement. What we do as a group, as a society is help each other with encouragement in order to go to these difficult places. That's the exact opposite of enabling people to avoid difficulties, enabling people to shrink from life.*

John: Yeah, that's right. Yes.

Serge: *Maybe that feels like a nice place to stop this conversation.*

John: Sure, yeah.

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