

Finding My Way

When all of our lives are so similar and yet so different, where can we look for guidance? As **Jessica Morey** has learned—and what she now teaches to teenagers—the best guidance is discovered in ourselves.

The eighth grade was no picnic. Like a lot of 14-year-olds, I felt isolated and confused. Where to go in life? And the combination of pulling away from my parents and dealing with my peers didn't help. Were my friends grappling with the same stuff I was? How could I know? I could barely name it for myself.

My mom made a proposal: "You and your brother should try a mindfulness retreat." If I hadn't seen over the years how she herself seemed different after her occasional retreats at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS)—when she came home, her eyes seemed filled with what I could only describe as joy—I never would have agreed.

But my brother and I did agree. So we headed off to IMS, full of skepticism and with a promise that if we didn't like it, mom would come get us.

It was strange when we arrived. Everyone seemed a little too nice. But our fellow teenagers seemed pretty normal, so we both decided to give it a go.

Over those four days, a kind of magic started to happen. The world became much more vivid to me. I walked in the woods after the morning meditation and stared at the sharp, bright greenness of the pine

forests. It was like my eyes had been polished. I remember the smell of the floors of the old bowling alley in the basement and the smooth feel of those floors under my feet. Examining the nature collages on the windowsills—sculptures of feathers, mossy sticks, leaves and rocks—I was awestruck. Not by how special they were, but by how simple, and by how my own attention to them revealed their beauty. I didn't put it all together right then, but something in me realized that the same kind of attention to the elements in my daily life revealed a beauty lurking there as well.

Our teacher, Michelle McDonald, said that when we get a taste of a peaceful mind, we accept each moment just as it is. "We're set on our course. We see the way." Goodness and worthiness are the way we are. Being exposed to this idea at an early age transformed my life.

I started to see the goodness in the people around me. My brother seemed to become a different person right before my eyes. Our friendship grew strong during the afternoons of free time we spent lying in a hammock, laughing together.

In the evenings the teachers offered talks woven with personal stories. One I'll never forget is →

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Nainoa Thompson’s journey aboard the Hokule’a, a double-hulled canoe the early Polynesians used to travel to Hawaii and beyond.

Nainoa was my teacher Steven Smith’s high school friend. He had navigated the Hokule’a across the Pacific from Hawaii to Tahiti—without any modern navigational tools. It was the first time anyone had achieved this in 500 years.

Nainoa had no intention of becoming a navigator. He just wanted to learn more about the stars and the ocean and was curious about how the first Hawaiians, his ancestors, got there. But as he followed his interests deeper, they led to meeting his teacher, Mau.

Mau was brought up in a family of traditional navigators on a small island in Micronesia. As an infant, his parents had placed him in tide pools so he would begin to feel the pull of the sea. At the age of four, his grandfather began teaching him the art of wayfinding, the ancient practice of non-instrument navigation.

From Mau, Nainoa learned how to read the stars and the moon, currents and waves, and patterns of bird flight to find his way on the open ocean, paying attention to subtle changes through concentration and quieting his mind.

Mindfulness has been my wayfinding. It’s helped me navigate the internal ocean of my mind—sometimes rough waters, sometimes calm, always changing. It’s taught me how to connect with and take refuge in my body when my thoughts and emotions become overwhelming. As I learned mindfulness, I learned that my body is always in the present. It doesn’t fabricate things, get confused, overthink, or second-guess itself.

I went on numerous retreats during my teenage years. Each one brought more clarity about what truly made me happy and where I wanted to head in the next year.

After graduating from high school, on my annual early summer retreat, I decided to take it a step

further and go to Burma to meditate. I called to defer my freshman year at Dartmouth, and a few days later I told my parents. Despite my mother’s own positive experiences with meditation, she wasn’t exactly thrilled. And my father? He cried—one of the only times I can remember his doing so. I understood; he just wanted me to get a good education and start a career. But somehow I knew this was the right way to go for me.

I didn’t try to defend my decision. I trusted my intuition and worked through the summer to save money, apply for a visa, and buy a plane ticket. Despite my parents’ continued protests, in the fall I left for Burma, where I dove into intensive meditation practice at a monastery.

Staying the Course

Meditating in Burma was *not* like a teen retreat—there were no afternoon breaks for guitar playing and Hacky Sack, no bonfires or small discussion groups. In fact, there was no talking at all. It was tough.

At one point I noticed that while I struggled, the woman in the cabin next to mine made it all look effortless. Annie was always smiling as she did her walking meditation and hung her laundry in the sun.

One day, I broke the silence and ran into her room, desperate to learn whatever secret practice she was doing. Instead, she explained how mindfulness can help even more if I direct it at the process of my own thinking. She helped me see there was a whole pattern of thoughts that my mind was producing, but I wasn’t noticing.

I saw that when I realized I’d become lost in thinking, each time my mind would immediately slip into inner-critic mode: “Ugh, I’ve done it again! I’m terrible at this! I’m never going to get it. What’s wrong with me?!”

Annie helped me pay attention to those self-critical thoughts and—more importantly—not to believe them.



This became incredibly helpful in the rest of my life. I began to see how much unconscious self-criticism was pounding away in my head: needing to get perfect grades, to be thin, to save the world, to “succeed.” Noticing these thought chains was the first step to not allowing them to throw me off track.

When I started college, I often thought of Nainoa’s journey. When he crewed that first voyage under Mau, he didn’t think he could be a lead navigator. He had no confidence in himself; he dreaded the doldrums and couldn’t read the subtle ocean currents and swells like Mau. Nainoa only trusted the night sky to be his guide.

During the journey, Mau would often leave the navigation to Nainoa. One night there was a storm—dark clouds, rain, winds whipping at 25 knots in constantly shifting directions. Nainoa didn’t know where to direct the sails. Mau went below deck, pulled his raincoat over his head, and didn’t offer any suggestions. Nainoa was filled with fear and doubt. The rest of the crew was looking to him for direction, but he couldn’t see anything; it was pitch black. He had no help from the stars or the moon.

In desperation, he leaned back against the rail and surrendered; his body relaxed and a warmth came over him. It was only then that he could sense where the moon was. He directed the crew to steer the canoe with confidence. After a time, the clouds parted and the moon revealed itself, just where he thought it was.

Four years later, at 27, Nainoa took his first solo voyage from Hawaii to Tahiti. In preparation, Mau advised him to keep in mind an image of the island that was his destination.

“Don’t ever lose that image or you’ll be lost,” said Mau. “Envision Tahiti and pull it out of the sea.”

The island destination that formed in my mind during that first teen retreat was a peaceful mind, a kind heart, and a different way of relating to people. Those early retreats helped shape the guiding vision of my life: that we are all capable of transformation,

we can read and respond to whatever conditions arise, and we can treat each other and the planet with more kindness.

A few years ago, I found myself in a kind of doldrums. I’d achieved everything I thought I wanted—a well-paid job at a clean-energy nonprofit with a big office that overlooked the White House, traveling the world to international conferences, helping solve big problems. But when I honestly assessed the impact of my work, I wondered who was reading the reports I spent late nights writing.

The only days I wasn’t wondering about how I was spending my time was when I was teaching at teen retreats. But when the newly formed teen mindfulness organization, Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (iBme), needed an executive director, I declined—I had worked too hard to build my career.

I continued to agonize about my direction. Maybe I should look for a new clean-energy job; maybe I should shift to sustainable agriculture; maybe I should get an MBA and go into private clean-energy finance. But then iBme hit a crisis: our new director fell ill with a life-threatening virus. This time, I was asked if I would take over.

I had to feel my way through self-doubt and intense fear of financial insecurity. But I also reflected on how deeply satisfying it is to witness teenagers learning to navigate their inner worlds.

I surrendered. I gave notice at my job. As soon as I committed to the decision, I felt clarity. How could I have more impact in the world than to introduce teens to the beauty of a moment and the safety they can cultivate in their own minds, to introduce them to what had made the most difference in my life?

A wayfinder, I’ve made it to a midway island and I’m flashing a light back at the teens. When they come to a retreat they know, at the very least, that there is an island of peaceful mind and kind heart—and there’s a way to get there. And I know that if they can keep that vision in their minds, they can pull it out of the sea. ●

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