



# KELLY'S CORNER by Jan Kelly

## Ellen Langer

Interviewing my long-time friend, Ellen Langer was a learning experience, or you could say, an experience—like talking to a moth with a new idea every wing stroke.

"This is hard to think about in the summer," she started, "but imagine you're driving and your car is skidding on the ice: what do you do? Most of us 'mindlessly' learned that we're supposed to pump the brakes of the car slowly to bring it to a stop. That's the way we initially learned it, and it doesn't occur to us to question what we know for sure. Today, with anti-lock brakes, the safer thing to do is to step firmly on the brakes rather than pump them. Most of what we know we learned mindlessly and as a result we are frequently in error... but rarely in doubt."

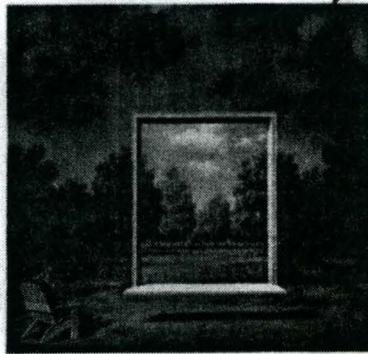
Ellen Langer, professor of psychology at



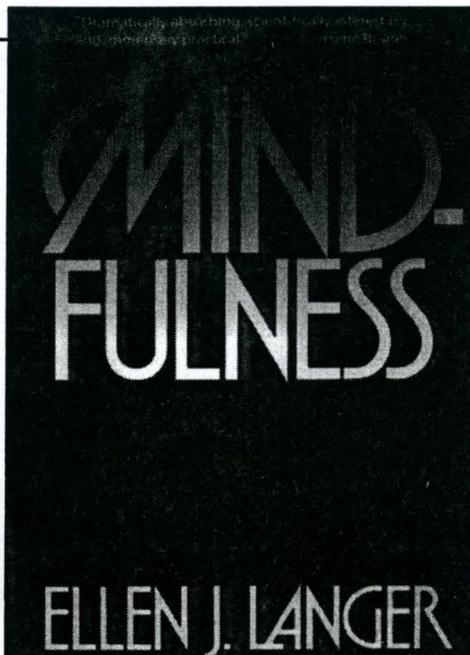
"Could radically change our concept of learning."

—Jerome Bruner

## The Power of MINDFUL Learning



ELLEN J. LANGER



Harvard University has authored *Mindfulness* and *the Power of Mindful Learning*, to name but two of her seven books. A long-time resident of Provincetown and a charter member of the Ladies' Tuesday Group at Bissell's Tennis Courts, she banters on and off the courts—always provocative. The group attends her lectures faithfully and each of us learns (or at least is exposed to) a new way of learning.

Langer has conducted research on the mindfulness of ostensibly thoughtful actions for over 25 years. Her findings, reported in her books astound and range from an increase in competence, to well being, to health and even longevity.

"The effects of mindlessness are greater than we think; increasing accidents, increasing forgetfulness, even premature death. On the other side of the coin, by being mindful we not only avert the dangers not yet arisen, but our eyes open wide to opportunities to which we would have been otherwise totally blind."

Most of what we have learned, Professor Langer contends, we have learned mindlessly so that everything we know is only partially true. "Some mindsets [which] we take for granted in our pursuit of happiness...as well as the [value] of some of the beliefs we live by,...may be part of the problem keeping many of us depressed."

For example, she explains why forgiveness may be a negative thing, how hope reinforces mindless evaluation; how hope may not be such a good thing, how comparing ourselves to others and attempts to increase self-esteem may reinforce feeling bad about ourselves. To delay gratification may be mindless. Most people who have attention deficit disorders don't see the difference between remission and a cure, for cancer is psychological not medical. These thoughts become clear in her lectures.

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Consequences of mindlessness range from memory problems to accidents to social incompetence, even to premature death. Her latest thoughts on the topic, she believes are outrageous and valid. Dr. Langer, a scientist, can prove her theories to be either logically true or can cite experimental data to back them up.

She threatens to describe her powerful theory of decision-making which argues against the pursuit of trying to make the

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right decision. She explains why loneliness is really not an interpersonal problem, and how to cure loneliness without the use of other people.

"Most of what we have learned, we have learned mindlessly as a result of many truths we consider 'self-evident' but truths which are often wrong and limiting. By understanding our own mindlessness we may become less victimized and may be able to exert more control over our lives."

Dr. Langer may be a closet Buddhist—many of her students at Harvard think this is so—but Langer, ever fresh, ever thinking, ever using knowledge at hand retorts: "They may say I'm a closet Buddhist but the importance of the mindfulness of which I

speak is mindfulness without meditation. It is a way of becoming mindful which is much more available to the western mind."

In a recent talk at Castle Hill, Dr. Langer shared in depth. "After making clear that evaluations are in our minds and not the things we see as positive or negative," she shared, "one needs to see how this mindful understanding makes many mundane experiences that rely on evaluation, look very different. Forgiveness, hope, courage, even remission from cancer are not as good as they seem. Similarly, regret, procrastination, and the

difficulty we often have making decisions, are not as bad as we might have thought."

Besides her seven books and hundreds of contributions to psychological journals, Ellen Langer has traveled the world speaking on her theories of mindful learning. She has also been on several TV talk shows and was interviewed on *Backstage at Lincoln Center*. Langer has a regular column in *Psychology Today—Just Think About It* and is the recipient of numerous awards in science and psychology, including a Guggenheim Award. Rumor has it that a feature film is in the works about Dr. Langer's life and works. We'll have to wait and see who Hollywood casts to play Professor Langer.