

Mindfulness... Seasons of Life & Chronic Illness

A painting by Flemish painter Dr. **Hugo Heyrman** has forever changed how I now think of the stages of life. The name of the painting which has touched me so deeply is "City Leaf". There is a special beauty in a single green leaf, that looks perfect, but is actually very vulnerable as it blows in the wind. The leaf is, of course, already dying, but its special beauty in the moment is unmistakable.

We all know, on some level, that from the moment we are born we are dying. This fact takes on a more special meaning when we are diagnosed with a serious chronic illness. There is nothing pretty about these diseases when only observed medically, but we have choices: We can either consider every day as another 24 hours moving us toward death, or we can feel even more alive and appreciate every day even more. Yes, some days are definitely more challenging than others, but we have the choice of being even more grateful to be here and with constantly improving treatments adding to quality of life, or we can be resentful of things we may have to change and activities we may no longer be able to do.

As we (who live in geographical areas which have seasons) go through the summer months, with autumn approaching, we will soon see the beauty of autumn and the changing colors of the leaves. I have vivid memories of

the second skydive I ever did. Just two weeks before the trees were all green and bushy; now it was late September, and I will never forget the sight below me when my parachute opened. It was truly awesome, with all the trees below changing colors and those colors being so beautiful that they literally took my breath away. It was a truly awesome and unforgettable site.

I mentioned this observation to a patient, about how beautiful the fall foliage was, and all he could think of was that they were dying. He was unable to see the beauty in the moment. Hugo's "City Leaf" is still green and beautiful in the moment, but nonetheless dying, as all living things are.

Many physically healthy people reach mid-age (when-ever that may be for any given individual) and only see their lives as half over – usually thought to be the best half. For those of us with chronic illness, many of us are just so

Continued on page 15...



Dr. Terry Wolinsky-McDonald is a licensed clinical psychologist in the Pittsburgh, Pa. area. She is a member of the IPPF Board of Directors and frequent contributor to the Quarterly. Her articles focus on the psychological aspects of living with P/P in patients, caregivers, and family members.

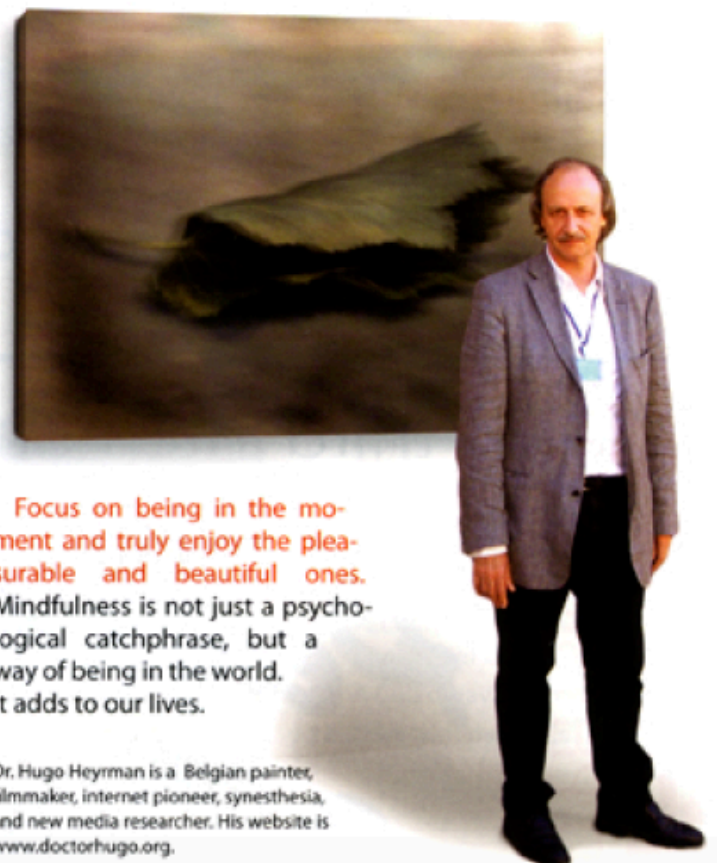
...continued from MINDFULNESS, page 6

grateful to be alive and treatable that we more deeply appreciate every day we are given, once the illness is under reasonable control. We don't think of our glass as half empty, but rather either half full or a glass that still contains water. In a way, these illnesses help put things in perspective, much like that second skydive did for me. There are so many more beauties in life than most people see. I think that was why the Tim McGraw hit song "Live Like You Were Dying" resonated with so many people.

"Mindfulness" can be thought of as the opposite of "mindlessness", just going through the motions of everyday life vs. "being in the moment". For a number of years the psychological term "mindfulness" was just another catch phrase; however, now the research is proving to us that **mindfulness cognitive therapy** is having a great deal of validated success in a wide range of areas. I always keep the lighting in my office low, with lamps versus overhead lighting, and there is always a candle on a table between sofas and chairs. Sometimes, after teaching a patient to slow down and deepen their breathing, I will ask them to just focus on their breathing and the candle. I will then systematically turn off all of the lamps. Patients always report reduced anxiety and stress levels with just this one simple exercise.

As autumn approaches for many of us, and leaves change colors as they begin their fall from the trees, pay close attention to the beauty in the fall foliage. **Try to just stay in the moment**, and you will experience a decrease in stress levels and intrusive thoughts. You will be amazed at how easily this is accomplished. Once diagnosed with your (or a loved one's) illness it may feel like the autumn of your life. Remember that after the leaves all fall and most trees are

bare, the winter will lead into the emergence of spring – a rebirth in a way – with summer not far behind with its own special beauty. Allow yourself to thoroughly enjoy the autumn season, knowing that it is taking us into a new season and that the cycle will continue. Many people say that a picture is worth a thousand words. In the case of "City Leaf" this is very true.



Focus on being in the moment and truly enjoy the pleasurable and beautiful ones. Mindfulness is not just a psychological catchphrase, but a way of being in the world. It adds to our lives.

Dr. Hugo Heyrman is a Belgian painter, filmmaker, internet pioneer, synesthesia, and new media researcher. His website is www.doctorhugo.org.