# The Joy and Dread of Autumn

Jay Michaelson

,

October 21, 2022



Here’s how bad I am at mindfulness.

At this time each autumn, as leaves begin to fall in earnest here in the Northeastern United States where I live, I actually feel a desire to somehow paste them back onto the trees.

So much for “being in the present moment” and “letting go” and all the other things mindful people are supposed to do.

And I actually love autumn!  I love the weather, the looks, the smells, even the dreaded pumpkin spice.

But I know that, as the Starks were warned, winter is coming.  For years, I’ve suffered from seasonal affective disorder, and while I’ve learned that mindfulness jujitsu of both accepting and mitigating it, still, I know it’s coming. Even if the autumn leaves are riotously beautiful, the bare branches of February are bleak and dour.

At least this conundrum is a teachable moment: yet another opportunity to notice how much the mind is neurotically “leaning forward” into the future, sometimes with anticipation, often with anxiety. We do this all the time: before a difficult work meeting, or a tricky conversation with our kids or our parents, or before really big stuff, like surgery or divorce.  From the sublime to the ridiculous, it seems as though human beings are evolutionarily designed to worry.

Indeed, we probably are. If you’re living in a world filled with predators, it’s better to flinch too many times than too few. The chilled-out humans got eaten – our ancestors were the worriers.

There are a few things you can try – we’ve actually created a collection of meditations to help with your own “fall dread,” [which you can check out in the app](https://10percenthappier.app.link/VYzGhhzTbtb).  Here’s what I do.

The preliminary step is mindfulness: noticing that I’m feeling anxious or fearful about the coming winter.  Okay – noticed, accepted, acknowledged.  Now what?

First, I come back to the body.  When I notice myself leaning into the future, I “[lean back](https://www.tenpercent.com/meditationweeklyblog/lean-back),” as Sharon Salzberg puts it. I do this actually, physically, somatically.  I do a quick mini-body-scan to see if there’s tension, and I see if it can be relaxed. I exhale. And then  I look around at the objects and space around me, as I’ve described in previous issues of Ten Percent Weekly.  For a moment, I do actually let go of the anxiety – even if I take it back up again a moment later.  That helps, and it trains the mind to let go more.

Second, I try to make friends with worry.  In the language of Internal Family Systems, all the parts of ourselves are trying to help – the worrier included.  Okay, worrier, I see you.  Thanks for doing your thing.  I’m not going to hand you the microphone, but – we’re good. I don’t need to try to make you go away.

Third, I give myself a little self-compassion, because as much as the worrier is trying to help, his worry does hurt.  Ouch – anxiety, fear, dread.  Ouch.  Sorry, Jay, that you’ve got that going on.  Here’s what I’d say to you if you were my friend:  You’ll be alright.  Fall is beautiful.  Winter is also beautiful.  And if you won’t be alright, at least you won’t be alone.

Finally, I acknowledge that this is a moment of wisdom. Change happens, impermanence is real, and everything passes away, from summer to youthful beauty to the people and beings we love.  This moment of change in the weather is a doorway to a much deeper truth, one that we humans struggle with for most of our lives.  So, I’m experiencing it.  I am not immune from aging and death, I am not different from other people, and this letting go is yet another training ground for the great letting-goes of life and death itself.  It’s a practice round.  Again.

And then, you know – joy!  Fall leaves, fall flavors, Halloween, Thanksgiving, gratitude, love, connection, sweaters, plaid, melancholy jazz, my favorite leather jacket.  It’s hard and good to be alive.

‍

[Dr. Jay Michaelson](http://www.jaymichaelson.net/) is a senior editor and podcast host at Ten Percent Happier, as well as a contributing writer to New York Magazine and the Daily Beast.  Jay has been teaching meditation for nineteen years; he is an ordained rabbi and authorized to teach in a Theravadan Buddhist tradition. His ten books include The Gate of Tears: Sadness and the Spiritual Path and [Enlightenment by Trial and Error](https://www.jaymichaelson.net/enlightenment/).

[Don’t Be A Jerk (to Yourself)](https://www.tenpercent.com/meditationweeklyblog/dont-be-a-jerk-to-yourself)

OFFERINGS

* [APP](https://app.tenpercent.com/start/register)
* [PODCASTS](https://www.tenpercent.com/all-podcasts)
* [BOOKS](https://www.tenpercent.com/dan-harris-books)
* [NEWSLETTER](https://www.tenpercent.com/newsletter)