



# The Highly Haphazard Woman

EVERYONE WANTS WOMEN TO  
BE MINDFUL, CALM, AND DELIBERATE.  
BUT, AS TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER  
WRITES, SOMETIMES A LITTLE CHAOS  
GETS THINGS DONE.

Illustrations by Asia Pietrzyk

## My yoga teacher, who is 23 and beautiful like a song

and who told me one day that she had gone into the yoga arts because the acting business made her feel like she was “being eaten alive,” stands over our inert bodies, and this is what she says: “We are slaves to the noise in our heads.” Then she says, “Leave your thoughts at the door. You can pick them up on your way out.”

She says this twice over a full 10 minutes of a 60-minute class that could be spent exercising but is instead spent lying on the floor. She says it in addition to the six-minute speech she gave before class and the three-minute period of rest she’ll give us after class, at which point we’ll get another 90 seconds for her to remind us of these values and then invoke spiritual themes to thank us for having shown up.

In the middle, she’ll comment on the fact that, by now, our thoughts, which were left at the door for us to pick up on the way out, may have crept back into the studio. She says to regard them like clouds passing by in the chryon of my brain, nothing to be addressed or absorbed.

We make eye contact when she says this. I narrow my eyes slightly and purse my lips and nod thoughtfully, and I wonder what she would do if she knew what was going on in my cloudy-sky mind right now. I wonder what she would do if she knew I had no intention of stopping my thoughts. I wonder what she would do if she knew about my thoughts about my thoughts—how I was thinking these thoughts about thoughts when they were supposed to be drifting away like clouds. I think if she knew, the roof would blow off this entire purple studio.

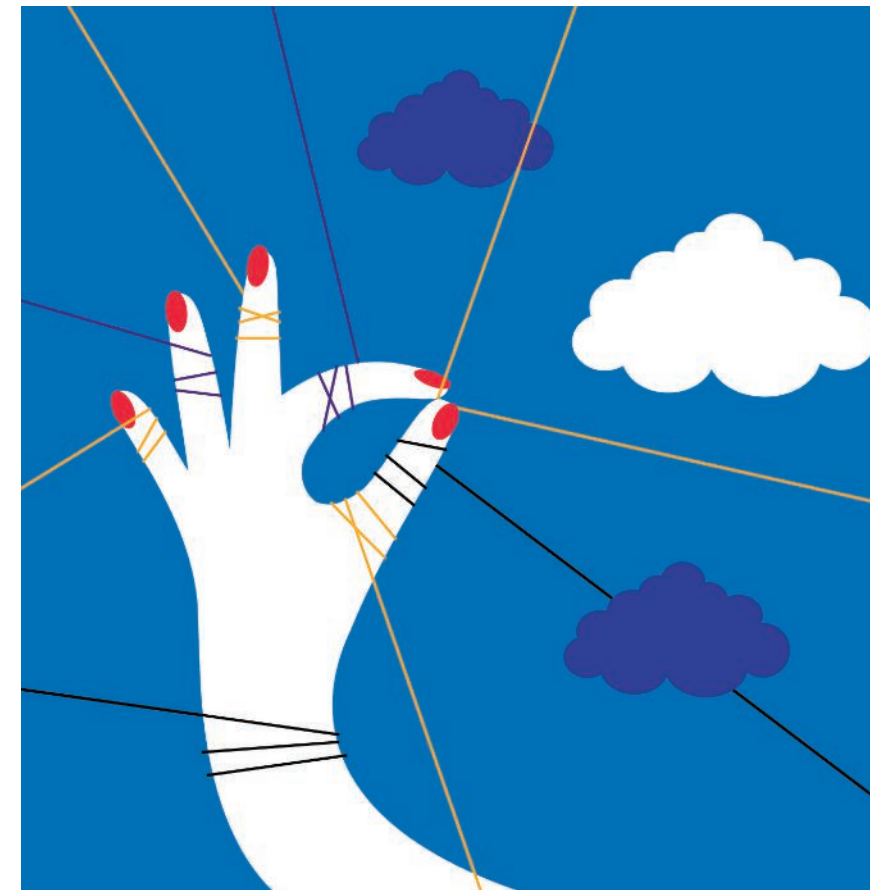
**THE YOGA TEACHER WANTS** me to clear my mind. She wants me to just do my yoga (though not that much yoga, if you count up her accumulated speeches). The wellness podcast I listen to wants me to have a routine. My dietitian thinks I should plan better to make better choices. The

teachers at my kids’ school think I should slow down. My friends want to go on a meditation retreat. They all want me to become this peaceful thing, this mindful thing. They want me to be free from intrusive thoughts; they want me to streamline my life for maximal predictability with minimal stress. They are trying to make me into a new breed of woman: the Highly Regimented Woman.

The Highly Regimented Woman is today’s ideal. She does one thing at a time. She doesn’t stray from her routine. She practices mindfulness. She doesn’t miss the 8 a.m. Thursday Pilates class. She leaves her phone in the other room. She is who we are supposed to strive to be, even if some of us are so far away from this ideal that we hear about women like this and think people are kidding. Meaning, I know some Highly Regimented Women. They are killing it out there. They are happy and focused and getting it done. I imagine being one of them sometimes. I imagine being someone who doesn’t, say, forget it’s band practice day or that book club was tonight, no, wait, last night? Who doesn’t—of course, all this is theoretical—show up at a different movie theater from her husband despite being told several times and having it noted in the calendar that we were going to the one near the mall. Being a Highly Regimented Woman would mean I could rid myself of my ability to multitask. She would have me finish the phone call and then cook the dinner and then really be in the moment.

She would make my life great. So why does just the idea of her fill me with dread?

**CONSIDER: IN THE LAST YEAR,** I wrote 12 magazine stories—90,000 words that actually got printed—for my job at the *New York Times*. For each one, I interviewed dozens of people. I did an investigative piece that required twice the number of interviews as usual. I revised my novel, which came out in June. I wrote 40,000 words of another novel and sold that too. I missed no more than two soccer games (younger son) and two basketball games (older).



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*They play year-round.* I threw parties. I organized meals for another mom who hurt her wrist. I listened carefully to my children and tried to suss out what they’d eaten at lunch and who they were friends with. I got a dog. I trained a dog. I resented a dog. I came to love a dog. I appeared on TV and podcasts. I put my kids on a bus to camp and then went on a book tour a few hours later. I saw *A Star Is Born* twice. I watched the first season of *Succession*. I watched all of *The Americans* with my husband, because it is important to have a show together. I attended my book club twice, and *I read the books*. I attended parent-teacher conferences. (I did not buy or cook food, but my husband did, and I managed to mostly feed myself when I wasn’t home.) I was a good daughter. I was an OK sister. I was a parody of prolificness.

My colleagues were in awe of me; friends asked me how I did it; people on Twitter made fun of me. I was honest with them all: I half-assed it. I did it by being a, let’s call it, Highly Haphazard Woman. I was scrappy and disorganized. I had 10,000 tabs up on my computer screen. I didn’t always

shower. I sat next to my children on the couch pretending to watch a movie while actually working. I entered soccer practices incorrectly into my calendar. I did this with games as well, and would have to weather the iciness of a car ride in which a shin-guarded 8-year-old who was promised he could play goalie had been driven an hour in the wrong direction only to find that the game was four towns away... three hours ago. Once or twice I forgot to drive the carpool. Just think about that for a minute. Once or twice, I left children waiting for me to pick them up, and I sat, unaware they were waiting. I’m not proud of any of this.

And then there were the things that were in my control: I left a dinner to go to the bathroom because suddenly, over the salad course, I realized how to solve a structural problem in my novel. Most of all, I told the people who asked, I took inspiration when it struck. When the right answer sat in front of me, I didn’t swat it away. I didn’t let it be a cloud that drifted. I didn’t have much in the way of what



a Highly Regimented Woman would call peace, but I had accomplishment, which was my own form of peace via a longer game.

Nobody liked these answers. They wanted to know that I was being successful and leading a balanced life. They couldn't bear the chaos. They wanted to know how to do it, but only if it meant slowing down, doing one thing at a time, thinking one thought at a time (but sometimes none). They wanted predictability and to never know pain in the offing. That's fair, I would say, but then you won't accomplish that much. This was very upsetting to the people I spoke with. They said that I wasn't living a good life, that I was too scattered to have any meaning in it, that I wouldn't remember my time as a parent because I was never really in the room when I was in the room. That presence is a gift.

I am told that routine and structure are good for the nerves. I'm told predictability and mindfulness will give me strength and peace. I believe them, but consider this too: What if my goals have nothing to do with peace and calm? What if peace and calm are the last things I want?

**I SPENT MY CHILDHOOD** in the future, watching a Seth Thomas clock on a gray wall of the maximum-security prison of my religious all-girls school.

High school is one of those systems that are set up to destroy a certain kind of person. From the minute you start ninth grade, you are strapped to a dart headed straight toward a bullseye, and no amount of thought and contrition can undo even the slightest stumbling as you begin your throw. Which is not to say I was ruined by ninth grade. It's to say I didn't think, after screwing up ninth grade, that any kind of cleanup job would have an effect.

Many of my classmates thrived. They took AP classes and made speeches and tucked in their shirts and were singled out. They were the recipients of warm smiles from the teachers. I started each academic year with optimism and purpose, and then something would happen. My focus would shift. I would miss a step, or more likely, I would never have become oriented to what we were doing in the first place. I had such a deep yearning to feel success. But by October, I brought my backpack home and let it stay, a blur, another thing I didn't focus on, in the corner of my room.

And so I watched the wall. Twenty-four minutes before this class is over. Two hours till lunch. Three and a half hours till the day is over. Four days till the week is over. Three weeks till the semester is over. Four days till I never have to be in ninth grade, 10th grade, 11th grade again.

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I failed at school—unequivocally. Not low grades. Failure. I was put into classes and forced to think about math when I wanted to think about English. I was forced to play volleyball when I wanted to read or write. I was forced to read and write when I wanted to play basketball.

Outside of school wasn't that different. There was dinner at 6:30 and bedtime at 9. There was swimming on Sundays and a calendar of Jewish holidays. I'd sit in synagogue on Yom Kippur, which was endless. Until one day I realized I could turn pages along with everyone else. I could stand and sit and bow. But I could also think. I could make plans. I could dream up stories I wanted to write and places I wanted to go. In the quiet, I could still move forward. You could hold my body in place and obligate it to show up to all kinds of places. But if the moment sucked, I could live in the past or the future. I could live wherever I wanted to.

Now, nobody can tell me when I'm done making up for lost time. Nobody can tell me how to spend my time. Nobody can tell me what I'm allowed to do inside my own skull.

**AFTER COLLEGE, LIFE CAME** at me quickly: a first job, a first layoff, a next job, a boyfriend, a husband, a child. On my son's first birthday, I got him a stuffed rhino and a babysitter. She came three times a week, for three hours each time. My friend Lisa, who had a baby the same week I did, had gone back to work months before. She asked if I was going to take a yoga class or get a manicure.

I told her no. I told her I was going to get back to writing. I was going to go to the nearest quiet place and sit down and not look up until the three hours were up. I was going to produce. After all this time, I was going to produce.



I had felt dead for such a long time. Working for other people, working at an internet start-up, which I knew wasn't my calling but I worried was the best I could do. I was worried I was someone with just a few ideas, and when those ran out, I'd have nothing left to write. But I sat down to do it, so great was the fear of ever working at something soulless again, and the ideas came. And then they kept coming.

The thing I don't do is try to control when and where the ideas come. What would happen if I was in a yoga class and allowed the idea for my next novel to pass like a cloud? Or if I ignored the pang when I was supposed to be on my morning walk that told me the answers to the ending of a story were coming, if only I would sit and receive them?

Here is the thing about mindfulness and routine and slowness: They are great in theory, but when they become more important than the things they were supposed to provide you, they are a danger. They can drown out the voices that are telling you how to live, and that's what I'm afraid of. These thoughts that everyone is spending so much time trying to chase away—they're gifts. They are blessings. They are the thing that makes us alive.

There are full magazines devoted to mindfulness at Whole Foods. There are mindfulness jars; my son brought one home from first grade—a plastic bottle with glitter that works like a snow globe. You shake it and watch the glitter fall and it's supposed to calm you down. There are goal journals and routine diaries that let you give yourself a star—Give! Yourself! A! Star!—for knowing how your day is going to go. You can now reward yourself for being predictable! The children are being taught meditation so they can bring the lessons of our folly home to us.

I understand why this happened. I am even happy it happened, so now the people who suffer from overwhelm can have tools to calm themselves and a language to communicate in. But it didn't happen just to the people who needed it. When the regimented life went mainstream, it somehow became insurrectionist to have a mind like mine: one that's always running, one that doesn't relent, one that races and commands my hands to do a million things at once. Somehow it has become objectionable to be someone who is winging it. It's become subversive to be scattered.

In my head, I run until I fly. In my head, the words are made out of colors and while I am flying, the sentences allow me to land gently. This is how I became a writer. The page is simply an organized manifestation of my head.

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I am lauded for my pages. Despite this, I still am criticized for my head. But come at it from the other side just for a minute. Consider that the thinking is what the whole enterprise is built on—that a body is a thing that holds up a brain, that all this exists so that the thoughts can come whenever and however they like.

**THERE IS A PRICE I** pay for living this way. Lest I sound too confident, lest I sound like I have found a magic formula, here it is, in the interest of full disclosure: My life is a mess. My mind is a mess. But nobody has been able to convince me that the value of a mind that isn't a mess is greater.

Sometimes I can't stop the words at night and I have to do a special kind of visualization for a minute or two to make them stop. Sometimes I hold my 8-year-old's hand up to my face while he's watching TV and I note that the baby pudge of it is nearly gone and I wonder if I was truly there for all of it—if I was truly there for any of it. (I also wonder if the benefit accrues to people who were, or if it doesn't really matter at all.) When it boils over, I will do

what I need to do. I'll cry. I'll watch TV in the middle of the day. I'll buy a pack of cigarettes and smoke just one. I endorse none of this. Maybe by now you can see that I am not trying to live an admirable life—just mine.

But sometimes I feel sun on my face for the first time in the spring. Or I notice that the dogwood tree has bloomed. Sometimes I watch my 11-year-old read, his eyes blinking every few minutes. I do this on my schedule. I do not preempt anything else for it. Sometimes, if a moment is great, I will stay in it. At other times, I will plan for better moments. I insist on the point of view that I'm not broken. That the thoughts are there to tell me how to live my life. That I can't tame them. That I can't be tamed.

What if I don't need more than that? What if I don't need a lifestyle? I have made the same bet everyone has, which is that they are living the best way they know how, and one day I will have to answer for it: I will have to answer to my kids for my distraction. I will learn that something went wrong because of my focus. But I can't live my life because I'm going to have to answer for it. I am hoping instead that I'm raising my kids to see that the pursuit of fulfillment is a better life than the pursuit of a value you don't share.

Maybe we're both right: me, and the Highly Regimented Woman. (And whoever is writing that mindfulness magazine.) We are both staring down an abyss, trying to figure out how to live. That's what we all want to know. And none of us knows it for sure. I begrudge nobody the right to try to figure that out, because it's the big question. There are studies that show that meditation works, that people thrive in routine. That there is no such thing as multitasking.

They never study me, though. They never ask me questions about what the cost-benefit analysis of all this living is. If they did, I'd tell them that it is none of their business. That how we live is for each of us to contend with; we have to live with our choices forever; it's for us to try to game the future and try not to regret too much. Sometimes I come across my son's mindfulness jar. I stop what I'm doing and I shake it. For a minute I understand. For a minute I am in the here and now. And then I wonder if I should write a story about mindfulness jars and, well, here that is.

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