



FLORIDA BAR NEWS

THE MINDFUL LAWYER: WAKING UP THIS SUMMER

By Scott Rogers ▶ Special to the News ▶ Columns

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Did you notice the trees swaying in the breeze the last time you were outside? Did you observe the gentle movement of leaves and flowers? It's certainly easy to get so caught up in our thoughts that we miss the beauty in our midst. If you can relate to this, the presence of trees and flowers offers you an ongoing opportunity to cultivate greater mindful awareness by observing the movement of trees, leaves and flowers.

Florida means “land of flowers” and with research pointing to the physical, cognitive, and psychological health benefits of mindfulness, the elusive Fountain of Youth may be closer *than you think*.

Mindfulness blossoms as the line thins between being present for our experience and *realizing* that we are present. Of course, we are always present. Phrases like “Be Here Now” remind us of this perennial truth. Books like “The Power of Now” (Eckart Tolle), “Waking Up (Sam Harris) “Wherever You Go, There You Are” (Jon Kabat-Zinn, “The Gift of Presence” (Caroline Welch), and “Present Moment, Wonderful Moment” (Thich Nhat Hanh) offer insights to more deeply appreciate this reality. And mindfulness practices help point us in this direction.

We don't always see what is right in front of us (think food in fridge, cell phone by the bed, and so on). It's not that our eyes are not taking in and processing these images; they are. It's that we are mentally somewhere else; our attention has been hijacked or we're or caught up in an internal dialogue. At such times we are no longer seeing clearly what is before us.

You can think of it as if the lawsuit: *In re: Distracted v. Focused* is being litigated in your mind. As in most matters, each side has its strong arguments. There are times when distraction, as well as focus, can serve our interests. Importantly, rather than choose one side over the other, we can serve as a witness and observe the activity of the mind as it vacillates between moments of focus and moments of distraction.

So, how can we pivot from litigant to witness? An accessible and powerful approach you can practice this summer involves intentionally shifting attention to notice the physical movement of the world around you. While you need not slow down, stopping or pausing can be helpful. The next time you are outside, look at a tree or flower. You may think you already see them, and that's just the point. We really don't. So, with a soft gaze and curious mind notice the movement of the leaves on trees, or the swaying of tree branches. Or zoom in on a flower and watch the petals. Given the time of day, temperature, and breeze, the movement may be subtle or readily apparent. As you take it in this movement, you may find to your delight that the activity of your mind settles down. If you'd like to make this a more formal practice, set your time for 3, 6 or 12 minutes and pay attention to the natural world before you. **When you notice your mind wander, bring attention back to the flora (focused attention practice). Or, sit back and soak it all in (open monitoring practice).**

This is not a time to be thinking about what you see, but to be seeing for the sake of seeing. Or close your eyes and listen to the sounds of rustling leaves, for the sake of listening. In time, you may find that as you witness the leaves with greater granularity, especially movement, your mind settles a bit. (Yes, *In re: Focus v. Distraction* might just settle). On the flip side, when you start thinking about something or become distracted, your awareness of the movement of the leaves diminishes.

If you detect this (and appreciate the power you have to influence the activity of your mind by shifting to a more observational stance) you are tracking neuroscience research that reports an interesting relationship between two brain networks: the default mode network (associated with distraction) and the attention control network (associated with focus). As one network become more active, the activity of the other is inhibited. When you choose to focus on the movement of the leaves, you engage the attention control network and inhibit the default mode.

Because trees, leaves and flowers can be so inviting, in choosing to pay attention in this way you can simultaneously witness the beauty of the natural world and tone down moments of distraction and mental chatter. You may find this to be a powerful practice you can enjoy throughout the summer which can be set in motion in a few seconds — with a flick of your attention — and be carried forward for as little or as long as you would like.



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