

MY WORD



NOT SO LONG AGO, MONIQUE HOHNBERG ATTENDED A CONFERENCE ON THE WONDERS OF THE HUMAN MIND. SHE LEARNED SOME USEFUL THINGS AND WAS EXPOSED TO SOME, UM, UNUSUAL IDEAS. BUT, ALL IN ALL, SHE DIDN'T LET THEM GO TO HER HEAD.

The Dalai Lama was definitely in the building. The queue for the *Mind and its Potential* conference snaked back half a kilometre. Noticing I wasn't wearing a pass, a staff member anxiously approached me. I reassured her my media pass was waiting for me beyond the metal-detectors and x-ray machines. Luckily, I only had water on me or it may have proved too much for her. I'm sure she wanted to smell it. Bomb-makers are giving coloured drinks and coffee a very bad name.

The conference brought together international experts on the mind. First up was the Dalai Lama. The interviewer spoke at length, but what was the question? I cringed through more muddled questioning while the Dalai Lama tried to respond. Finally, exhausted, he uttered the words: "I don't know," which received overwhelming applause.

The Dalai Lama spoke about mindfulness. He claimed that we could see reality when freed from negative emotions. For example, anger can make us see 'red' and we can't properly judge the situation. With a clear mind, however, we see the truth and can choose the best course of action instead of reacting in a destructive way. He explained this is what Jesus meant by saying: "The truth shall set you free."

This is not to be confused with trying to remove all anger. It can actually be a good thing, as in the case of moral outrage or using anger (as motivation) to fix your bad habits. Just so you know, the Dalai Lama gets angry, too.

After listening to a complex model of behaviour the Dalai Lama commented that a dog that always fights other dogs will be

very lonely. A friendly dog will have lots of companions and be happy. This seems like common sense. Are you bossy and wonder why you're resented? Or shy, and people take advantage of you? It was as if he was telling you something you knew already, but needed reminding.

In the next session one of America's leading psychologists declared the last hundred years of psychology has been based on two false beliefs: we are driven by the past and treatment has focused on the negative. Hurrah! Could common sense be prevailing? The psychologist's new model is authentic happiness, where we flourish by living with purpose and having good relationships. This makes sense, considering that neural pathways become stronger when we use them. Moving towards happiness dissolves the sadness. In other words, *move on*.

Yet I doubt whether some people (okay, whingers) will stop dwelling on the harm their husband/mother/lover did to them and how this made them dysfunctional wrecks. Meanwhile, cynical types can spend happy hours sneering about the new psychobabble phase. The rest of us can discuss our new neural networks. Really, there's something for everyone.

The next day I attended a workshop on removing bad reactions and anxiety through meditation techniques called Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. The presenter, who has a doctorate, asked us to recall a traumatic event. I chose a car accident, focusing on the unpleasant sensations the memory caused – tight chest, churning stomach – and held my attention until

they disappeared. I then visualised a best case scenario: everyone getting out of the car unharmed. Repeated sessions, along with other techniques, can apparently result in being desensitised and have been successful with patients.

Next up: a resilience-building choir workshop. Really. Strangely, the workshop leader talked mainly about her own family history. Huh? At question time, the microphone was handed to a gentleman who proceeded to shower her with adulation. Then he was recruited to play the father as she sang Puccini's aria 'O Mio Babbino Caro' (Oh my dear Papa). Next we lay down, the lights dimmed. Primal wailing sounds blared from speakers. Nooooooo!

I jumped up and fled. Enough was enough.

Nearby, another 'expert' with a doctorate was teaching 'micro expressions'. Upon entering, I was handed a confidentiality-form that might have been composed by NASA. This prevented me from writing about the session. Disgust rippled through me (though surely it was disgust in a positive, moral-outrage kind of way) and I departed, again.

Determined not to let anger overcome me and ruin the day, I thought about the good things I had learned. I walked home with my mind as clear and beautiful as the gorgeous day in which I found myself. It seems the truth *did* set me free.

Monique Hohnberg is a film journalist and is also writing a book on how to overcome tragedy. She last wrote for The Big Issue about Avatar star Sam Worthington.