



## The Imprint of Mindfulness with Dr. Ellen Langer

Leading Learning Podcast  
Transcript for Episode 373

**Ellen Langer:** [00:00:00] When people are mindful, the products that they produce actually bear the imprint of that mindfulness.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:10] I'm Celisa Steele.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:00:12] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:00:21] Celisa and I almost always enjoy the interviews we get to do for the Leading Learning Podcast, but they're not all equal. Sometimes we get to talk with someone whose thinking and research have deeply influenced our work and lives. Such is the case with Ellen J. Langer, AKA the mother of mindfulness. Dr. Langer was the first woman to be tenured in psychology at Harvard, where she is still professor of psychology. The recipient of three Distinguished Scientists awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Liberty Science Genius Award, Dr. Langer wrote the international bestseller *Mindfulness*, as well as *The Power of Mindful Learning*, *Counterclockwise*, *On Becoming an Artist*, and, most recently, *The Mindful Body*.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:07] Dr. Langer is a return guest to the podcast, and, since I had the pleasure of speaking with her last time, Celisa does the honors in this episode, number 373. They talk about what mindfulness is (hint—it's not meditation), the ubiquity of uncertainty, mind-body unity, attention to variability, mindful contagion, how we never really make decisions, and how our perception (of time, of ability) changes what we're capable of. In short, there is plenty of food for thought in this conversation—a feast, in fact. Celisa spoke with Dr. Langer in August 2023.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:01:56] You are known as the mother of mindfulness, and mindfulness is clearly this thread that runs throughout your work, including your latest book, which we're going to talk about more in a minute. But just to help listeners more fully engage in this conversation, tell us what you mean by mindfulness.

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**Ellen Langer:** [00:02:16] That's a very good question, Celisa, because I'm not talking about meditation. Meditation is fine. Meditation isn't mindfulness; it's a practice you engage in that results in post-meditative mindfulness. Mine is more immediate, and it's not a practice. It's so simple that it almost defies belief. Noticing new things. When you notice new things, the neurons are firing, and 40 years of research says that it's literally and figuratively enlivening. But we don't notice new things because we think we know. And so what happens is, if you simply notice things about things you know, you come to see, "Gee, I didn't know it as well as I thought I did," and then your attention naturally goes to it. I often, when I'm giving lectures, start by asking people—so I'll ask you this, Celisa—how much is one plus one?

**Celisa Steele:** [00:03:05] I'll fall into the trap and say two.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:03:08] Yes, everybody does. That's what we were taught. And, usually, at that point, you tune out—who is this woman, and why should I listen to her? But it turns out that one and one is not always two. If you're adding one pile of laundry plus one pile of laundry, one plus one is one. Adding one wad of chewing gum plus one wad of chewing gum, one plus one equals one. One cloud plus one cloud equals one cloud, and so on. And, in fact, in the real world, one plus one probably doesn't equal two as or more often than it does. What you need to do is sit up and pay attention. Is this an instance where one plus one equals two, or perhaps it equals one? Actually, people often don't know that when they're adding, they tend to use a base-10 number system, but if you were using a base-2 number system, one plus one would be written as 10. So the answer to almost any question is "It depends." And the way to be mindful is to start off recognizing the ubiquity of uncertainty.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:04:10] Everything is uncertain. Everything is constantly changing. Everything looks different from different perspectives. As soon as you think you know, you're going to be caught off guard, probably, and find out, in some instances, you don't know. And this happened to me many years ago. I was at a horse event. Now, you didn't tell your listeners that I'm Harvard-Yale all the way through. That's important for this story. So this man asked me will I watch his horse for him because he wants to get his horse a hot dog. Well, nobody knows better than I—they could know as well, but not better—horses are herbivorous; they don't eat meat. The man came back with the hot dog, and the horse ate it. And it was at that moment that I realized everything I thought I knew could be wrong. It's very humbling. But it's also very exciting because that means all of the things we think we can't do or that can't be done by others also become uncertain. We can't know that we can't. And, for me, that's what propelled lots of the work that I describe in *The Mindful Body*.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:05:15] Well, let's do talk about that new book a little bit now, and tell us what prompted you to write this book. Why the book, and why now?

**Ellen Langer:** [00:05:24] Well, there probably couldn't be a better time, but I think, no matter when I did it, I would say there couldn't be a better time. It's one of those things that, if somebody is going to help us be happier and healthier, there is no better time than the present. We've done a lot of research that, since my last book—and this is the way that I make people most aware of the work. I want to get it out there because, to my mind, the findings are very important for everybody's health and well-being. And so this book, it's interesting. This book started as a memoir, and then I decided, "No, I don't know. I don't want to write a memoir," and then it became what it is, so there are lots of personal stories in there. So that was fun for me to write. But I think that, when you look at the research that is in the book, it's self-explanatory as to why now and that the cost of medical care, if we put into practice some of the things that this research suggests, we might not need the medical care that we currently need.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:06:33] I did notice in the acknowledgments where you said that it did start as a memoir, and I found that fascinating. You mentioned that it went into an idea memoir, and I just loved that concept, of this idea memoir.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:06:46] Yes. But you see, the thing is that my ideas are anything but linear. So writing an idea memoir became too difficult. And then I just write, and people can call it whatever they want.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:06:58] Well, I think that we all personally have an interest in improved health, whether that's for ourselves or for people we love. And there are, of course, also societal benefits to improved healthcare. But, given that this is the Leading Learning Podcast, I want to focus a little bit less directly on the healthcare side of things and a little bit more on some of the implications for leading and/or learning that is definitely there in the work that you do. And I had that leading and learning lens on as I was reading *The Mindful Body*. When I got to one sentence in chapter 10, I felt like, "Wow, this is perfect! You are answering this question." And that sentence that I have in mind is that "Perhaps the primary job of the leader, just as with teachers, is to encourage the mindfulness of those being led or taught." Maybe you can make the argument, in brief, for why leaders and teachers really should focus on encouraging mindfulness in themselves and then those they are leading or teaching.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:08:02] Well, let me answer in a backwards way. Typically, we're using yesterday's solutions to solve today's problems, and that's not a good thing. And the more

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mindful the leader is, the more they realize they don't know. And when you know you don't know, you sit up and pay attention to other people, who, in any particular instance, may know. Everybody knows something. We did a study a while ago where we had orchestras perform either mindfully or mindlessly—simply instructed, “Remember when you played this piece of music, and you loved the way you played it? Just replicate it.” Versus “Play it new in very subtle ways that only you would know.” We taped it, then we played it for people, and we asked, “Which performance did you prefer?” The musicians themselves and the audiences overwhelmingly preferred the mindfully played piece. Well, it wasn't until I wrote this paper up for publication that I realized how it spoke to leadership. Here we have a situation where we have a group performance where everybody is essentially doing their own thing, but you end up with superior, coordinated experience/performance.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:09:16] You know that, if everybody is mindful, then everybody is drawing their cues from the same ongoing situation. Once the leader recognizes that they don't know—and too many think they do know, and then, again, they're using yesterday's solutions to solve today's problems, and they're never going to win the race, whichever race they're in—you tend to have a different respect for people. Lots of my work is about how we become non-judgmental. Everybody says you shouldn't be judgmental, but then nobody knows how you turn it around. Many people say, “Okay, so you're inconsistent, Clarissa. I'll just let you be inconsistent,” but that never works. If you recognize that behavior makes sense from the perspective of the person who's doing the behavior, and you ask, “Well, what sense does it make?” Well, your being inconsistent, I realize, is because you're flexible. You don't like me because I'm gullible. You want me to change until you recognize that's because I'm trusting.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:10:22] And it turns out that every single negative description we have for somebody has an equally positive but oppositely valenced alternative. So that leads us to feel differently about people. And, when we're leading people, rather than thinking, “This person is top of the line, and this other person is somebody who I can't trust,” and so on, when we apply these simple rules, we see, “Gee, there are certainly moments where even that person we question...” If you were a teacher, and you started a class, and you asked how much is one and one, and you had little Janie raise her hands, and she says it's one, the way we are now, where we think we know, you'd put her down. The class would look at her disparagingly, and that would destroy her life—sad story.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:11:11] But, anyway, in this scheme, what you would do with little Janie or big Peter (adults) is assume that there's some sense in what they're saying, figure out the sense in what they're saying, and then everybody learns. When you encourage the people you're

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leading to be more mindful, you're doing several things, but probably most important—or one of the important things—is that, when you're mindful, you see opportunities to which others are blind, and you're able to avoid the problem before it arises, so everything is going to go more smoothly. You are creating an environment where everybody feels good about themselves. It turns out that, when people are mindful, the products that they produce actually bear the imprint of that mindfulness. Being mindful is so easy that what happens is now your relationships improve. People see you as authentic, genuine, that you're seen as charismatic. Your relationships, the products are better—and it's good for your health, and it's the essence of feeling good. There's no downside, which is nice.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:12:34] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at [tagoras.com/services](http://tagoras.com/services).

**Celisa Steele:** [00:13:05] Maybe you can talk a little bit about mindful contagion because I found that really fascinating in *The Mindful Body*, when you wrote about that. So tell us a little bit about that and what you found out.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:13:16] Okay. Well, let me tell you, first, that when I was writing the book, I had a chapter that I thought was the woo-woo chapter. I never report findings that we don't have, but some of them are so strange that I question, "Hmm..." because I don't want to throw out the baby with the bath. There's so much solid information in the book that, if this seems too out there, let it just stay out there. But you know that when you're with people who are mindful, you're going to feel more at ease because they're less judgmental. So, in that way, mindfulness is contagious. But it goes beyond that, and this is bizarre. We gave people index cards to read—now, I did this 40 years ago—and the index card would just say something on it like, "Mary had a a little lamb." Nobody sees the double "a." I said, "Okay, tell me how many words you just saw? I'll pay you for accuracy." It doesn't matter; they don't see it. Okay. Now, if people are mindful, it turns out they do see it. All right. So now we have somebody sitting in a lab, and we have somebody working with us, a confederate, and the confederate is going to be mindful or mindless. They're not looking at the person. They're just sitting next to them, and, wildly so it seems, when that confederate is mindful, the participant sees the double word.

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**Ellen Langer:** [00:14:47] But we also have a lot of data that I think I also reported here. We have a wine tasting experiment, and the experimenter is mindful or mindless. These are heavy drinkers, who are our research participants. And the question is how much do they drink? And, when they're with the mindless experimenter, they drink more. We have people interacting with kids who are autistic, and they're either mindful or mindless. When they are mindful, the children are indistinguishable from kids who are not autistic. There are many mechanisms for this, but you can't lose by being mindful, and people will like you more, whether you have to speak to them or just be in their presence. I don't know. The last of these woo-woo studies, we had people in a room meditating, and then we had them leave. Then the participant would come in, and the participant is given all sorts of cognitive tests. Versus the participant enters a room that had not just been occupied by people who were meditating. There's something in the air, it seems, that, when you're in that room where people have just been mindful (in this instance, through meditation), your scores are better. I don't know what to make of it, but it's exciting.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:16:12] It is exciting, and I think, for me, one of the implications I was seeing is we've always talked about the value of peer learning, for example, and I think sometimes that gets boiled down to, oh, well, you can learn from their experiences, or they can share examples of what's failed or what's worked for them. I think that's part of it, but I think there's something in your work here that also suggests just the fact of being surrounded by others who are actively interested in and mindful about whatever the topic is, there's a huge benefit in that to learning.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:16:44] Oh, yes. I think the most important part to learning is for people not to feel evaluated. People enjoy challenges when they're playing games. They don't enjoy the challenges when they're in work settings, for example. They're scared. What are they scared of? That heads are going to roll. That somebody is going to think they're stupid. And so on.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:17:06] That actually is a topic I wanted to talk about because I think your concept of this universal attribution of uncertainty has a very particular benefit in the learning situation because adult learners can be afraid to appear dumb or to not know the answer. And so, if we recognize that no one knows everything for sure, then that can reduce that shame and open us up to learn.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:17:37] Well, it's not just that everybody doesn't know everything for sure. Nobody should know anything for sure. Remember, one and one sometimes equal one. But oftentimes we're afraid to seek help or afraid to show up because we don't know, and people in

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that situation are making what I call a personal attribution for not knowing: “I don’t know. You may know. I better get out of here or pretend.” The alternative to that is a universal attribution, which is the correct one, I believe, in this instance: “I don’t know. You don’t know. Nobody knows. Nobody can know because everything is always changing.” Again, everything looks different from different perspectives. And so it makes you very strong when you’re in the face of somebody who acts as if they know. And it’s very easy to poke at them—and, yes, it’s not so nice to show them that, in fact, they don’t know. You can either know something mindfully or think you know it and behave mindlessly. When you know it completely—if you’re playing golf, people think that what they’d like to do is get a hole-in-one every time, be fully expert.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:18:49] But once you get a hole-in-one every time, there’s no game there. There’s no there there, and you’re mindless. Not knowing is actually an advantage. You could do a crossword puzzle, and then you could do it again right after. Well, that’s not fun because you know the answers, or you still don’t know the answers. Either way, it’s not fun. What is the essence of this mindfulness is that experience of engagement, and that experience of engagement is going from not knowing to knowing for the moment, not for all time, again, because everything is always changing. And one of the ways we should be teaching people to understand this is to teach conditionally. So you don’t say one and one is two. The way to teach that more appropriately would be one and one may be two, one and one can be two, one and one is often two, and so on. Because, as soon as you think you know, then you’re no longer there for the way things change.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:20:07] You also make the assertion in the book that we really don’t make decisions. Can you talk a little bit about that, the fact that we don’t make decisions and this illusion of control?

**Ellen Langer:** [00:20:19] This may be a little complicated, but let me try to state it. First of all, if we start by realizing that outcomes are neither good nor bad, it depends on how we understand them. An example I’ve used too often, but you and I go out for lunch. The food is good, wonderful. The food is bad, wonderful—I’ll eat less. So, for me, it’s always a winning situation. People suffer from stress. Events don’t cause stress; it’s the view you take of the event that causes stress. You open it up and take a more mindful view, the stress disappears. When people are making decisions, they think that what they’re supposed to do is a cost-benefit analysis, hat are the costs, what are the benefits. If there are more costs than benefits, you don’t choose this option, and so on. But, if every cost is a benefit, and every benefit is a cost, and it’s all up to you to interpret that, then, when you add them up, they’re not going to tell you what to do. So you say, “Should we go back to that restaurant?” I’m going to say, “Whatever you want to do.”

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Because I know that, if the food is still no good, I'm going to enjoy your company and not be distracted by eating. Or I'll eat it.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:21:35] So that's the first part. People think they should be doing these cost-benefits. They shouldn't. Now, all decisions are between or among things that are the same or things that are different. When they're the same, it doesn't matter what you decide, and, when they're different, as soon as you understand the difference, the decision follows mechanically. For example, if I say to you, "Do you want A or B?" How could you know what to want? What is it? So you gather some information, and you see, ah, A is \$50, and B is \$1,000. What's the decision? You mechanically just say B. I think that, when we add all of this together with other pieces—and I think it's more persuasive because I can take more time with it, to read it—that I end up with the view that, rather than spend our time worrying about making the right decision, instead we should make the decision right.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:22:36] I think that's very profound and very practical. I think there's so much time and energy spent in organizations around trying to think through the "right decision."

**Ellen Langer:** [00:22:46] It's also about decisions are holding the world constant, and things are changing. That's why I say, again, that everything you're deciding was based on yesterday, which is only going to be partially related to tomorrow.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:23:01] You spend a fair amount of time in *The Mindful Body* talking about attention to variability and that kind of mindfulness. Would you explain to listeners what attention to variability is?

**Ellen Langer:** [00:23:14] For sure. We deal primarily with it with respect to chronic illness in the way that we can heal ourselves, but it's true for everything. And it sounds fancy: "Oh, my gosh, attention to variability." It's just another way of saying mindful, being mindful, noticing change. Let's say your spouse is always "Oh, he drives me crazy—he's always..." whatever. Well, nobody is always anything. If you alerted yourself even once every half hour that you're with the person, are they being that way now? You'd see sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren't. We do this with respect to big diseases—multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, chronic pain, and so on—and we call people periodically, "How are you feeling now? Is it better or worse than before? And why?"

**Ellen Langer:** [00:24:08] And three things happen. The first is, when you have some chronic illness or even stress—let's do it with stress. People who are stressed think they're stressed all

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the time. No one is anything all the time. So we call you periodically. We're going to say, "How are you right now? Is it better or worse than before? And why?" And you see, "Gee, I'm not always stressed to the same degree. In fact, now I'm a little less stressed, a little more stressed." Or, "Before, I thought I was maximally stressed. No, I wasn't. This is the worst." Whatever. Then you see you have some control over it. But what's causing it? You do this periodically throughout the day, throughout the week, and you find out you know you're stressed when you're talking to Ellen Langer. Well, if that's the case, then the cure is simple—don't talk to me, or talk to me differently.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:25:00] We've been using this for the big ones. Now, what happens with lots of chronic illnesses, the word *chronic* leads people to believe—and the medical world fosters this belief, I think—that there's nothing you can do about it. And there's always something you can do about it. When we didn't have a cure for COVID—just imagine that you're a couch potato, and all you're doing is watching television and eating, overeating, which all of us have done on occasion—but that's your MO. That's what you're doing for months on end. Compare that person with an Olympic athlete. Now, I don't have data about this, but, just a thought experiment: If both of them got COVID, who do you think would suffer more? No matter what's wrong with us, there are always ways we can build up our strength; the other parts of our body then are going to be helpful. And then, using this attention to symptom variability, you end up curing some of these so-called incurable diseases, and you end up getting along with the person who you thought was always whatever—add your own adjective.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:26:23] You share some studies around things like eyesight, which we tend to think of as fixed. And this idea of varying some things and the attention to variability, it seems to—again, if I'm putting the learning lens on this—suggest some ways in which we might be able to outperform our own expectations if we're willing to open up and remove some of our expectations.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:26:47] Yes. Once we realize that our behavior varies, then it's very easy in some sense. What's making it vary? When am I better? When am I worse? We take cures—seeming cures, I think—too quickly. People fail an eye chart (whatever that means) and then immediately get glasses and then teach their eyes not to be able to see, rather than recognize sometimes we see better than others. If you were doing this attention to symptom variability, in this case, it would be vision variability, and you notice that around three o'clock in the afternoon, you don't see as well. Well, then you have choices. You can put your glasses on. You could have an energy bar (that would be my choice)—just a chocolate bar, but you call it an energy bar because that's the way I'm using it. Or you could take a nap. Everything varies, and

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any time we're holding it still, we're doing ourselves a disservice. That's why, if you were to have just one mindset, which is the only one you should have, it should be that everything is uncertain, so you get to exploit the power in that uncertainty.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:27:56] And something that I don't think we brought up yet—it's probably important and listeners probably want to know—how do I get from discussions about the illusion of predictability and decision-making and risk-taking, stress to chronic illness? What motivates that, and what's a large part of this book, is an understanding of mind-body unity. When you put the mind and body back together, then you recognize wherever you put the mind, you're affecting the body; wherever you put the body, you're affecting the mind. That means every thought you have, in some sense, is affecting your longevity, if nothing else. Sometimes the effects are small; sometimes they're large.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:28:40] But the first test of the mind-body unity was a study I did a long, long time ago, the counterclockwise study. And, just briefly, we took old men to a retreat that we retrofitted to 20 years earlier and had them live there as if they were their younger selves. They spoke about the past in the present tense. For them, it was 20 years earlier, and these were old men—I'm getting older, so I don't mind, but they were even older than I—that, without any medical intervention, in a period of time of one week, their vision improved, their hearing improved, their memory improved, their strength improved, and they looked noticeably younger, not 20 years younger (truth be told) but still noticeably younger. So now lots of the new research is involved with, again, testing the mind-body unity idea. And what all of these experiments show is that the amount of control we have over our health is extraordinary, and most of us are totally oblivious to it.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:29:43] Let me give you an example of just one of these studies. We inflict a wound. Now, the review board is not going to let me really wound people, and I don't want to hurt people either, so it's a small wound, but the procedure would be exactly the same. You have this small wound, and you're in front of a clock. For a third of the people, the clock is going twice as fast as real time, unbeknownst to you. For a third of the people, the clock is going half as fast as real time. And, for a third of the people, it's real time. The question we're asking is does that wound heal based on the time you think it is by looking at that rigged clock or based on real time? And it turns out our perceptions control our healing. We have people in a sleep lab who wake up, they see a clock that tells them they got more sleep than they got, less sleep than they got, or the amount of sleep, and, again, biological and cognitive functions follow perceived amount of sleep. So much more is possible than most of us realize.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:30:49] You're focusing on that possibility in the mind-body unity piece of it, but, again, they're clear learning implications. If you think you can learn something faster, then you can.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:31:05] Exactly. In fact, if you were playing the role of Einstein—so, right now, you assume you're Einstein, you mess your hair up and whatever, and then you approach whatever the problem is. If you assume you're Einstein, my guess is that you'll be able to solve the problem better than just as yourself.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:31:29] I know that when I'm in the shower that—I don't have any evidence of this except the possibility that it's true. I'm singing, and I'm Barbra Streisand. I can't carry a tune, but I'm now Barbra Streisand or Maria Callas, whoever I'm being, I hit more notes. And nobody is within earshot, or else I wouldn't be singing, so who knows? But, yes, there's no question that we can do more. In fact, we did a study ages ago, and I don't remember the details of it, but what we did was we have people do something, and then we just asked them to do four more, and everybody was able to do it. We can all do more. In the book, we have lots of studies on fatigue, and what we find is that the context, in some sense, determines how tired we get. You might have somebody at home who's word-processing, fingers are killing him. He's really bored out of his mind. He's exhausted. He goes home exhausted and now sits down and plays the piano.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:32:30] It's the same thing, right? Except it's not—the context. We have lots of studies, but the simplest one is, if I asked you to do 100 jumping jacks and tell me when you're tired, most people say they're tired around 67, somewhere between 65 and 70, two-thirds of the way. If I ask you to do 200 jumping jacks, now people aren't tired until about 170—140 rather, two-thirds of the way. We set ourselves up—and this may be getting too involved in the weeds here—but part of the reason might be that the structure we use for an activity allows us to get out of the activity and then go on to something else. You see, mindfulness is energy beginning, and I'm having such a good time talking to you, Celisa, that why should I do anything else? And so I don't get tired. In fact, if you watch me lecture—most people start off high, and then they get down—but not most people, many people. For me, it just goes up and up, and so you can't shut me up once I get started. So now there's a life to be lived. How do we arrange life and go on with the rest of my life since, whatever I'm doing, I'm enjoying so much?

**Ellen Langer:** [00:33:47] We build in an amount of time something should take, and then we can easily exceed it. You can never prove that you can't. Science can only show you that, if you try something and it doesn't work, then it doesn't work. It doesn't tell you that it can't work. And,

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if we add that to what I said before about the game of golf, where every time you're swinging the club, you're getting it right, a hole-in-one), then we don't want to be that expert. We want to keep learning. And so you try something, it doesn't work. You try something else, that doesn't work. You try something else because, once you've mastered it, it's over. If you think that you won't always be successful, even in a competitive situation, play tic-tac-toe against a four-year-old. You'll always win, but, yes, there's no game there. So, implicitly, we know that we like the adventure. We like a little bit of the struggle, the not knowing and overcoming whatever odds, and it's the process of mastering that we seek, not being the master. Unless your learners are, as we all should be, see ourselves as always learning rather than "Oh, now I know it."

**Celisa Steele:** [00:35:08] I want to ask you to talk a little bit about level 1-2-3 thinking and how we can use that to change mindset.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:35:15] It turns out that, when you see somebody do something, too often we think we know why they did what they did, and we're often disparaging them. But, if you sat back, and you were a little more mindful, and you thought of other explanations for that very same behavior, you'd learn a lot more. Let me give just a simple example. Let's say we see a woman drop her cane. Level 1 would be somebody who, "So what? Who gives a damn?" Doesn't do anything. Level 2 rushes in to help her. Level 3 person, just like the level 1, also doesn't help, but that's because they're aware that, if she can figure out how to pick up the cane herself, she'll be that much better off. So level 1 and 3 are doing the same thing—they're not helping—but they're not the same person. And it's always the case that—not always, but it's often the case. You have people who never read a particular magazine, people who read it, and then people don't read it anymore. Again, 1 and 3, they always look alike, but they're very different. The problem is the people stuck at this level 2. They're the ones they think they know. They see the person who's actually more advanced than they are, and they mistakenly see them as that level 1 rather than level 3. If you came up with an explanation for why somebody did something, that, even if that hadn't been the reason, you could learn from it, and you'd treat that person differently, there's, again, nothing to lose by that.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:36:57] We always like to ask guests who come on the Leading Learning Podcast a little bit about their own lifelong learning habits. So talk to us about whether you have particular sources, habits, or practices that help you continue to learn and grow.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:37:12] I don't have habits because most habits are mindless. I'm 76, so I have, since, I don't know, five years old, always looked for the other side. You say X; I say yes, but here's how it could be not X, and so on. So I don't have to practice this; it just comes naturally.

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But you live a certain number of years, and things are going to happen, and, for me, they're rare, but, when something like that happens, I simply ask myself, "Is it a tragedy or an inconvenience?" Rarely, if ever, is it a tragedy, and so that immediately brings you back to a state of calm. I like to tell people how to fall up rather than fall down. Let's say a simple thing. Let's say I bang my car. That's too bad. It's going to cost a little money. I'm out of a car. So I get the car fixed, and then I always have them fix something else. At the end of this, my car is even better than it was before the accident. I try to do that with everything, and, most of the time, it works.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:38:28] Is there anything else that we haven't yet talked about that you would love to have a chance to share?

**Ellen Langer:** [00:38:34] People might be interested in how I came to the mind-body unity idea in the first place. There are two fun stories. I was married when I was young—also divorced when I was young—but I went to Paris on my honeymoon, and so I was very, very trying to be all grown-up. We're in this restaurant, and I order a mixed grill. Now, here's the proof that I am fully sophisticated. On this plate was pancreas. I had never eaten it. The thought of it was making me sick. I asked my new husband which of these items was a pancreas. He pointed to something. Okay, I ate everything. I'm a big eater. I ate everything on the plate with gusto. Now came the moment of decision—was I going to be able to eat the pancreas? So I started eating this, and I'm getting sick, really, literally sick. He starts laughing. I say, "Why are you laughing?" He said, "That's chicken. You ate the pancreas ages ago." So we make ourselves sick. The other story is not as fun, but my mother had breast cancer that had metastasized to her pancreas, which is the end game. And then, magically, it was gone. How do you account for that? I think that, for me, the mind-body unity idea does account for it and can explain spontaneous remissions.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:39:58] Both have pancreas, both of your stories there.

**Ellen Langer:** [00:40:02] Oh, yes. Interesting. I never realized that.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:40:11] Dr. Ellen J. Langer is professor of psychology at Harvard and author of the books *The Mindful Body*, *Mindfulness*, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, and more. Learn more about her books and work at [ellenlanger.com](http://ellenlanger.com).

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:40:26] As I hope you heard in the interview, Dr. Langer is smart, insightful, and funny, and we do encourage you to read her work and think about the implications and applications for your learning business.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:40:38] And Celisa and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:40:52] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode373](http://leadinglearning.com/episode373), you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:41:09] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

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