



Linda Ciotola: Mindful Witness

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Linda Ciotola is a Certified TEP: trainer-educator-practitioner of psychodrama, group psychotherapy, and sociometry; and an accredited Certified Trainer in the Therapeutic Spiral Model™ of psychodrama used specifically for working with trauma survivors. She is Co-Leader and Developer of the Therapeutic Spiral Bodyworkshop specifically designed for healing body-based trauma issues and a Certified Health Education Specialist (Ret.) with 45 years experience in education, group facilitation, and lifestyle counseling. Linda holds ACE (American Council on Exercise) certifications as a Personal Trainer, Fitness and Yoga Instructor, Health Coach and MINDBODY Specialist. She was honored in 2008 with the Zerka Moreno Award for outstanding contributions to the field of Psychodrama. She is co-author with Karen Carnabucci of *Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods - Beyond the Silence and the Fury*. She presents widely at regional, national and international conferences.

This is part of the What Sustains Us project, edited by Serge Prengel.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: *Hi Linda.*

Linda: Hi Serge.

Serge: *You have a personal perspective on how to teach mindfulness that you're going to share today.*

Linda: Yes. I'm happy to do that. I have heard from many of my trainees as well as other friends and people who have crossed my path that they find becoming mindful a challenging process and meditation a challenging process. In the field of psychodrama, which is basically a modality that uses action, we have a way of teaching mindfulness in action, and I'd like to share that with the audience today, with anyone who's interested in teaching mindfulness, and I think, secondarily, it may be a benefit to those who are trying to learn to practice mindfulness.

Serge: *Mm. Okay. So, we're going to be talking about experiencing mindfulness in action.*

Linda: Correct. Just to kind of get us all on the same page, more or less, I just wanted to talk about what we would say psychodramatically. We would call it the mindful witness role, because we talk about roles in psychodrama. The mindful witness role is the part of us that is able to observe, with compassion and without judgment, our thoughts, our feelings, what we might call our act hungers. Just let us observe that, not asking any questions about "Why?" Or "Do I like this?" or anything like that, but

just basically observing and being what I what call an accurate reporter, the part of us, the role that gives clear, current, and accurate data.

Serge: *Okay. We're, we're really ... I'm sorry. Sorry. I wanted to just slow down a little bit. We're talking about something where we're going to be going into a sense of paying attention to parts within ourselves, roles, and, specifically, the role of that mindful observer.*

Linda: Yes. Exactly. I like to call it the mindful witness role. In psychology, it's called the observing ego role, but I really prefer the mindful witness. It has more of a transpersonal flavor to it, which is really in alignment with my practice as a yogi, so I like that. It kind of blends my practice as a yogi with my practice as a psychodramatist.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, so mindful witness role, and there is that quality that, in a way, we transcend the notion of just small ego in that role.*

Linda: Yes.

Serge: *We may access something that is a larger sense of consciousness.*

Linda: Exactly right. That's beautifully said. Thank you for that, Serge.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: I'd like to proceed with how we do teach this in action, and this is the way that I've come to teach it myself. Of course, various psychodramatists may have slightly different ways that they teach the role, but I like to use something, a technique in psychodrama that we often use that's called concretizing, which is we take something that's not in the physical realm, and we find something in the physical realm to represent that, so to kind of hold the energy of whatever that is.

I happen to have a very dear friend who's a landscape photographer, and she takes beautiful pictures of nature. She's made cards for me from those beautiful photographs, and I usually have a selection of those for people to choose from, and they can choose a card to hold the role of the mindful witness for them. It might be a card, for example, that is ... It could be any card from nature, but right now, I'm actually looking at one that has a tree that's lost its branches in the forefront of the picture. There's a lake, and then there's kind of the beautiful wooded autumn forest behind that, but it could be any picture from nature that would speak to someone about the part of the self that can take what I would call the bird's-eye view of things, taking a step back.

Serge: *When you said concretizing is really at many different levels, because we're not, this is not an abstract sense of that role, but having, for instance, an object, a picture that represents it means that there is more of a visceral connection or more of an emotional connection with that.*

Linda: Exactly. That's exactly right, Serge. I will have them then spend a few moments with the card, and sometimes I, in a group, I may have them share why they picked that particular card with someone else, but if it's an individual thing, I may have them, in any case, individual or a group, place the card somewhere in the room where we say it holds the role. They might put it on the wall or place it on a ledge or on a table or anywhere in the room that speaks to them of where they know their witness role is going to be held for the duration of, let's say, the workshop that we may be doing.

Then, I will do what's called role reversing them into the witness role. Let's say we've been sitting around as a group, each person in his or her own chair, in a circle. I may have them take their chair from the circle, turn the chair to face the witness card, wherever they have placed it, and then I will place them in the role of the witness. They'll go, and they'll pick up the card and hold the card. When they do that, they have, then, stepped into the role of the mindful witness.

Serge: *Good. Again, here, there is a sense of embodying that by separating the role with the card, looking at it as something that's external, but then moving into the place where it is and holding it so that then you have a sense of being in that role and embodying that role.*

Linda: Yes. Exactly right. Embodied is very important, and Doctor Moreno, who was the creator of psychodrama, was one of the very first of practitioners to really include the body in work. That's a very important piece is that our mindful witness is an embodied mindful witness and, at the same time, is connected to what I would call that higher self of the person who is able to be connected more to the transpersonal, as well, so that's a very important piece.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: Yeah. The next thing would be, as the person is role reversed into their mindful witness, I would say to the person "So, you ... " Of course, now, their in the role of their mindful witness. I might say "So, you are, uh, Serge's mindful witness," and there is Serge, sitting in the chair over there.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: You're able, because you have been with Serge a very long time, able to notice with compassion and without judgment what Serge is thinking, feeling, and the act hunger Serge may have at this time. Just take a look at Serge in the chair and speak to Serge. Let's just let Serge hear from you, his mindful witness, what he might be thinking or feeling or noticing. That's a very important part of the meaning of this workshop today and maybe what Serge would like to take away from it.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: Yeah.

Serge: *Here, we have three people. There's you as the workshop leader, but also, in a way,*

as the voice that's going to be facilitating the processes, that conceivably could also be a role that the person can take themselves.

Linda: Right.

Serge: *There's the role of the mindful witness that you are speaking to.*

Linda: Yes.

Serge: *This mindful witness has a very clear connection to the person, Serge or whoever that person is, so that can address what's happening with the person from that role of mindful witness as opposed to being caught in the drama and intricacies of living life.*

Linda: Exactly right. If we were doing this, teaching this to someone just individually, they would be speaking to themselves in the empty chair, but if we wanted to do so in a group, we could have the person choose another group member to hold the role of himself or herself in the empty chair while he or she stepped into the role of the mindful witness. There's a couple of ways to do it. If you have a group, you can use your group members. If you don't have a group, and you're just working by yourself or with one other person, you can use the empty chair.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.*

Linda: The important thing is to really what we would call role train the person in the role of the mindful witness. The more someone gets to practice being in a particular role, the more the role becomes familiar and the more skilled one becomes in that particular role. I, as the director, might interview the person while he or she is in the role of the mindful witness. For example, let's say the person said "Well, Serge, I see that you're very curious about what's going to happen in the workshop today." I might follow that up with a question to the mindful witness about "Mindful witness, do you have a sense, can you observe what Serge is particularly curious about? I'm wondering if you're observing any anxieties or any excitements about those curiosities." Then I would just give that, I love your phrase, Active Pause, and then let the person say, from the mindful witness role, what else he or she may notice about what's going on internally.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Essentially, you, as the leader, as the facilitator ...*

Linda: Yes. I'm called the director in psychodrama. Yes.

Serge: *Yeah. You're facilitating, you're mentoring the mindful witness to get more into that role of mindful witness by making suggestions of what to pay attention to and how to pay attention to it.*

Linda: Exactly right. Then, I might do something like role reverse again, which would mean I would put the person back in his or her chair in the group and then say to him or

her, in that role, "Is there anything you want to ask of your mindful witness, something that may be of help to you today during the workshop?"

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: The person may ask a particular question, and then I would immediately role reverse him or her back into the mindful witness role so that he or she answers his or her own question from the role of the mindful witness.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: This role reversal back and forth then begins to really install, if you will, the very deep connection between the self that kind of operates out in the larger physical world and the mindful witness that can always be present and observing and can be of help as needed.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.*

Linda: Relates to how we would approach role training someone to develop their mindful witness. Then, if it were someone I was working with on an ongoing basis, I might give them their card to take home and have them practice the role at home. I might say "If you know that you have, you know, something coming up that's something that sort of unsettles your state of homeostasis, try putting yourself in the role of your witness and, you know, role reversing. Put an empty chair out for yourself and role reverse back and forth." I would have them practice that at home and then maybe do some journaling about it between the time I had last seen them and the time that I would see them after they practiced at home. We could then have the observer role, the mindful witness role, kind of give a soliloquy, if you will, having observed the whole process that occurred during the week.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: Doing that and incorporating the practice and incorporating the journaling and then having the witness kind of be the reporter, the good journalist if you would, at the end of the practice period is a way to keep deepening the connection between the part of the self that is the mindful witness and the part of the self that just operates on a more regular kind of day to day, in the moment process.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's a very simple, very elegant approach, and the logic is that in everyday life, we just operate, and much of it can be done on automatic pilot.*

Linda: Yes. You said it.

Serge: *Mindfulness is about the ability to interrupt the automatic pilot in order to see possibilities.*

Linda: Yes.

Serge: *What you're doing is, essentially, training the person to be able to shift between the operating capacity, the functioning in life, but also the mindful part that's going to be a mindful witness, and to have a dialog between the operating and the mindful witness.*

Linda: Exactly right. Exactly. That's beautifully said, Serge. Thank you for that beautiful summary.

Serge: *Thank you.*

Linda: Because I think it's very, it's a very easy thing to get caught up into kind of the standard operating modality of how we go through life from one thing to the other. Doing this process really teaches us to be grounded and aware so that we can observe what's going on, both within ourselves, our thoughts and our feelings and our body sensations, without making an evaluation of it, but just being present.

I've done a considerable amount of work with trauma survivors from my training in the Therapeutic Spiral Model, in particular, of psychodrama, which is specific for trauma survivors. This is actually one of the roles that we use in every single workshop that we do with trauma survivors. We actually begin with training people to be in this role, and so, as the work of the workshop progresses, if we notice that someone is losing their grounding, this is one of the many things that we can do to help that person, because we can immediately reverse them out of the action space, so to speak, into the role of the mindful witness, where, then, they can take a step away from being in the action of the drama and settle back in to that mindful place, the place that's connected to the breath, and kind of be in the watcher role rather than in the doer role.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: Make sense?

Serge: *Yeah. You're describing a sense that there is a training effect. Like in many other situations, you start in a relatively simple situation, but then, with some training, it can be expanded to handle much more difficult situation where it's possible to step out.*

Linda: Exactly right. It's been one of the most rewarding things to me, as a psychodrama director, to see how people who do come and learn this and other supporting techniques then learn to do this, as you said earlier, for themselves. They get to kind of be their own director, if you will, so that they begin to notice, then, when they get clues from either their thought pattern or sensations in the body or emotions that they might be feeling, that they're going to, perhaps, move them out of what Bessel van der Kolk and Dan Siegel call the "window of tolerance", meaning our window where we're not either hypo or hyper aroused, but we have enough stimulation that we're able to function and go about daily life and make our decisions and so forth and so on, but we're not in fight or flight, and we're not in

freeze.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: When people learn the mindful witness, they can observe in themselves when they feel like they're being pushed to the limits of their "window of tolerance", and instead of feeling like they have no control and are just, like, kind of doomed to get into that spiral of fight or flight or the opposite end, to just freeze, they can mindfully put themselves in the witness role and pay attention to their breath and then just notice and accurately label what's going on.

Serge: *Right.*

Linda: That puts them into a much safer space and keeps them from feeling like they don't even have control over what's happening to them within their own body, mind, heart, and spirit, but then, in fact, the witness is a part of themselves, as well, and so, therefore, they do have this very dependable part of the self that can observe and label but not get caught up in the drama of it.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. There's a very, very functional, simple definition of mindfulness in everyday life that consists in finding in ourselves that ability, that role to be a mindful witness to our life and to be in dialog with it and to cultivate that.*

Linda: Yeah. That's right. That's right, that we're simply witnessing the sensations and thoughts and emotions that come up as we engage in our ordinary life and notice it. I like to ... Sometimes, instead of using cards, if I'm in a workshop, I might use stuffed animals or puppets. Sometimes, a person might choose, for an example, an eagle to represent the part of the self that's the mindful witness that kind of has that bird's-eye view that looks down and clearly sees everything but really isn't down in the rough and tumble of it. You know.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: There are many times when I've had folks go home and actually do their own artwork, draw something or make a collage, perhaps, that they then can place somewhere, wherever it's convenient for them, that holds the role of the witness for them in their own environment.

Serge: *Mm-hmm (affirmative).*

Linda: It's kind of a cue, like a visual cue, that they can see, and it's a reminder of "Oh, my witness. I can ... My witness is here. My witness can help me out." Somehow, being involved in the process of creating that concrete representation of the witness helps to, I would say, improve the connection. If you talk about how, in technology, sometimes we have a poor connection, but it helps to deepen and clarify the connection between the self that goes about daily life and the part of the self that is in that mindful witness role.

Serge: *Yeah, yeah, yeah. Maybe, if we find conclusion to this conversation, it might be something about encouraging people, as a first step, to find some kind of a concrete representation of what's going to evoke for you that state, that role of mindful witness.*

Linda: Yes.

Serge: *It could be an object. It could be an animal. It could be a drawing. It could be a picture, but something that's going to speak to you and remind you of that mindful witness role.*

Linda: Yes. Exact-

Serge: *Then, having that reminder to engage in the equivalent of conversation, role reversals that you were describing before, of having, maybe entering into that mindful witness role to see the situation from outside the drama and communicate with the actor as it's happening.*

Linda: Exactly. Thank you for that very eloquent summary. That really sums it up beautifully. Thank you for that.

Serge: *Thanks, Linda.*

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