

Creating Space *for* Stillness

Emily Squirrell's journey brings her home to Waterloo to open a dogma-free, multi-technique meditation studio

BY ANDREA PERRY
PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

A row of low, white candles flickers along the front wall. A freshly steeped pot of decaffeinated tea steams from a small kitchen to the side, inviting you over to accept a mug on the house as you peruse a colourful stand of books – free to borrow, as long as you return. Participants for the upcoming class arrive, one by one, and take their places on the thick, grey zafu cushions arranged around the teacher's seat.

Emily Squirrell, owner, operator and meditation guide, is by the back door greeting arrivals with a joyful smile and one hand on the side of her shifting belly. She is many months pregnant with her first child. "It's hard sometimes to find room in my abdomen," she says, as she makes her way to the front to begin the class.

Squirrell's sincere and open presence as well as the philosophy behind her meditation studio, tell you that – normally – she is an expert at making space.

Creating space for stillness and guiding others to touch a stillness within themselves is Squirrell's motivation for launching The Present, a dogma-free, multi-technique

meditation studio nestled along the newly reconstructed stretch of King Street South in Uptown Waterloo (building number 92, if you are looking).

If you ask, she will tell you, "Stillness is the foundation." From stillness comes rest from – and awareness of – the habitual thinking mind that prattles over all of our daily experiences. But stillness is also about absolute freedom and creativity. It is a place from which, rather than controlling, we can allow.

Practising what she preaches, Squirrell's studio espouses a pluralistic approach to meditation.

"All paths to the meditative state are created equal," she asserts, meaning that you don't have to believe anything in particular – say, Buddhism or Hinduism – in order to meditate. "What I try to share are the methods and techniques to guide you to a place of stillness. . . . Anyone can follow the breath; anyone can be led into their own inner terrain. From there, you can discover for yourself what you know to be true based on your own experience. . . . It's meditation and mindfulness without the ideology."

And so it is, as you find your place on your own cushion, take another sip of



Emily Squirrell and her partner, Vincenzo Cherubino, are expecting to welcome a child into their family this summer.



hot tea and settle in to the easy sound of Squirrell's voice as she welcomes the room and invites you to close your eyes. "Or not," she adds. "You can keep them open, if you prefer."

The Present, which opened in January, is the culmination of Squirrell's own inward and outward journey that took her from a background in behavioural psychology and a successful career in advertising, through a personal crisis, and onto an impassioned search for the real, meaningful substance that underlies everyday life.

Born in Waterloo, Squirrell, 33, has always been interested in examining the human experience. Studying and working in behavioural psychology was a natural starting point, which she then transformed into a career in advertising. She lived and worked in Toronto for six years, using her knowledge of human psychology to analyze target groups for marketing; she would then flex her creativity to help develop effective messaging based on that analysis.

Though outwardly successful, Squirrell came to a crisis point when personal devastation – the passing of her father and the end of a significant relationship – prompted her to start asking questions. "My reality was rattled to the core. . . . It was as if those two events combined kicked me off the edge of a full-time quest. I started questioning my own life – what is the purpose? – and also existential questions, such as: what is the meaning of life in general?"

Once those questions began, Squirrell no longer felt connection and satisfaction with the life she had been living. "It was as if I was going through the motions – went to school, got a job, worked in downtown Toronto, lived in a condo. . . . But I sensed that life was more meaningful than I was letting on, and that my time spent on this Earth could have far more value – to me, and to others – if I turned my energy toward something else. . . . There was some other substance in life that I suspected to exist, and I needed to go figure out if it was real and true and what that was."

In pursuit of this substance, Squirrell



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began to explore meditation. In what she calls a “smorgasbord of spirituality,” she joined a number of meditation circles and studied with a variety of teachers in the Toronto area. “I was consuming experience . . . because I didn’t know what I didn’t know. How do I get to the thing underneath it all?”

In 2015, after some time balancing this new exploration with her advertising day job, Squirrell left for Bali, Indonesia, on a six-week yoga instructor certification course at Blooming Lotus Yoga. In line with her quest, it was a yoga that focused on knowledge and wisdom, oriented toward meditation and inner knowing.

The six weeks expanded into another six months when Squirrell accepted a full-time contract to run the retreat centre. However, although she was clearly making great strides along the new trajectory she had chosen, she continued to feel a sense of inner discord. “Outwardly the experience

was hugely beneficial. I got tons and tons of experience guiding meditation to beginners and experienced meditators and teaching yoga. But there was still a sense of discontentment going on inside. And I found that really hard to reconcile.”

Returning from Indonesia, she connected with Adyashanti, an American-born spiritual teacher whom Squirrell considers to be her core teacher. Under Adyashanti’s guidance, she spent time at silent retreats where she continued to examine the questions that propelled her.

Squirrell’s moment of transformation came when her quest shifted from directly seeking answers to an open curiosity.

“It was only when I gave up my own ideas of what was there that I truly began to feel into what really was. When we drop our expectations, we can start at No Mind, or Beginner’s Mind – where you come in with so little information that you’re able to notice what’s there more naturally. You’re

not looking out for what you already think to be true.”

This transformative realization forms the essence of the philosophy behind The Present. Of her own journey, Squirrell summarizes, “What I was in search of transcends belief systems; transcends the mind.”

No one could tell her what she was looking for because it is unique to her and is not easily communicable in words. By extension, as Squirrell brought the studio into being, she could not endeavour to promote a certain ideology or a particular path to others. She could only create the space and offer the guidance that would allow others to have their own experiences.

“I realized that resting in stillness and silence, that was the bedrock of my entire spiritual life that never seemed to waver. That aspect of meditation and stillness, and inviting people to be in stillness together is the one thing I felt really confident about. Other spiritual knowledge and teachings

could come and go, but I knew stillness was its own teacher.”

What Squirrell realized about the value of openness in her search for substance was also true of her understanding of meditation. Through her varied meditative experience, she discovered that there is no one right way to approach it. “Every style and technique had its benefit. My personal joy is in teaching a variety of techniques and approaches to allow people to discover for themselves the best path forward in their meditative journey.”

Waterloo was both a natural and considered choice for a studio. Being her hometown, Squirrell has a personal connection to the area; however, she also believes the combination of big, outside-the-box thinking, as well as a deep groundedness make the communities of Kitchener and Waterloo apt for meditation and mindfulness.

She cites Waterloo’s Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics – a world-class organization that involves scientists from all over the globe in a mission to “advance our understanding of the Universe at the most fundamental level, stimulating the breakthroughs that could transform our future” – as a prime example of the type of open curiosity and exploration that resonates with the philosophy and objectives of The Present.

In addition to the Perimeter Institute, she says, “We’ve got innovation coming out the ying-yang. We’ve got Communtech; we have the two universities, the technology companies. So, stimulating original thought is something that is natural to the community.”

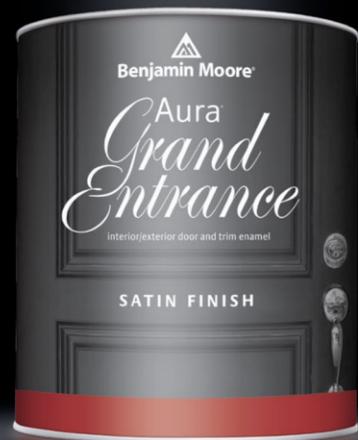
All that big thinking, she says, is complemented by the agricultural community. “We have big beautiful roots – like Germanic roots. We’ve got incredible organic farming, great food movements. We have the

Mennonite community. So there is also this groundedness in Kitchener-Waterloo. It’s not all heady. I was confident that those two elements in a community make it a prime opportunity for meditation and mindfulness.”

The Present offers a range of programs. You can choose your own adventure among an introductory meditation class, self-guided stillness, body awareness, breath-focused awareness, love meditations, sound baths to stimulate deep listening, working-with-emotion meditations, and sleepyttime – a class designed as a sleep aid through evening relaxation. Though Squirrell’s main priority is to facilitate possibility through stillness, she acknowledges the “fringe benefits” of meditation, which include stress relief and relaxation, improved sleep, increased mental and emotional health, and a greater sense of connection to oneself, others, and the world.

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studio also promotes specifically science-based approaches to meditation. It is a style commonly referred to as mindfulness, or Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. “Although my life story is rather spiritual in style,” explains Squirrell, “that’s not true for everyone and it’s not necessary in order to experience the depth meditation and mindfulness offers.”

The classes are designed for beginners as well as experienced meditators. The first class is free. Following that, drop-in rates are \$12 a class, with monthly and yearly packages also available.

The Present also offers corporate workshops, seminars and “learn to meditate” programs. These programs draw from a style of meditation referred to as Open Monitoring, or what she likes to describe as “open-minded awareness.”

“When we are in a state of openness and allowance, original thought can penetrate us,” Squirrel explains. “When we are contracted on a thought or expectation, we close ourselves off to possibilities. . . . If a company values creativity and original thinking, meditation and mindfulness may be the best thing to contribute to its bottom line.”

Creating a full circle in her own journey, Squirrell is looking to bring a meditation and mindfulness course to her former advertising firm in Toronto. She is also bringing the Open Monitoring philosophy to the Perimeter Institute. “If you are trying to crack an impossible quagmire in theoretical physics,” she says, “the ability to move into a still space of unlimited possibility could be just what is needed.”

Coming back to her own quest, Squirrell says The Present allows her to keep engaging her own endless curiosity and to do so within a community. “I always wanted to play with others in the realm of curiosity, and this allows me to do that.” Finally, she says, “It feels like an honest day’s work. If I am helping others to find stillness – in whichever way works best for them – that is truly an honest day’s work.” ☺