Prelude When I was little, my dad used to read us Sherlock Holmes stories before bed. While my brother often took the opportunity to fall promptly asleep on his corner of the couch, the rest of us listened intently. I remember the big leather armchair where my dad sat, holding the book out in front of him with one arm, the dancing flames from the fireplace reflecting in his black-framed glasses. I remember the rise and fall of his voice as the suspense mounted beyond all breaking points, and finally, finally, at long last the awaited solution, when it all made sense and I'd shake my head, just like Dr. Watson, and think, Of course; it's all so simple now that he says it. I remember the smell of the pipe that my dad himself would smoke every so often, a fruity, earthy mix that made its way into the folds of the leather chair, and the outlines of the night through the curtained French windows. His pipe, of course, was ever-so-slightly curved just like Holmes's. And I remember that final slam of the book, the thick pages coming together between the crimson covers, when he'd announce, "That's it for tonight." And off we'd go—no matter how much begging and pleading we'd try and what sad faces we'd make—upstairs, up to bed. And then there's the one thing that wedged its way so deeply into my brain that it remained there, taunting me, for years to come, when the rest of the stories had long since faded into some indeterminate background and the adventures of Holmes and his faithful Boswell were all but forgotten: the steps. The steps to 221B Baker Street. How many were there? It's the question Holmes brought before Watson in "A Scandal in Bohemia," and a question that never once since left my mind. As Holmes and Watson sit in their matching armchairs, the detective instructs the doctor on the difference between seeing and observing. Watson is baffled. And then, all at once everything becomes crystal clear. "When I hear you give your reasons," [Watson] remarked, "the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning, I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe that my eyes are as good as yours." "Quite so," [Holmes] answered, lighting a cigarette, and throwing himself down into an armchair. "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room." "Frequently." "How often?" "Well, some hundreds of times." "Then how many are there?" "How many? I don't know." "Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed." When I first heard it, on one firelit, pipe-smoke-filled evening, the exchange shook me. Feverishly, I tried to remember how many steps there were in our own house (I had not the faintest idea), how many led up to our front door (I drew a beautiful blank), how many led down to the basement (ten? twenty? I couldn't even approximate). And for a long time afterward, I tried to count stairs and steps whenever I could, lodging the proper number in my memory in case anyone ever called upon me to report. I'd make Holmes proud. Of course, I'd promptly forget each number I so diligently tried to remember —and it wasn't until later that I realized that by focusing so intently on memorization, I'd missed the point entirely. My efforts had been doomed from the start. What I couldn't understand then was that Holmes had quite a bit more than a leg up on me. For most of his life, he had been honing a method of mindful interaction with the world. The Baker Street steps? Just a way of showing off a skill that now came so naturally to him that it didn't require the least bit of thought. A by-the-way manifestation of a process that was habitually, almost subconsciously, unfolding in his constantly active mind. A trick, if you will, of no real consequence, and yet with the most profound implications if you stopped to consider what made it possible. A trick that inspired me to write an entire book in its honor. The idea of mindfulness itself is by no means a new one. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, William James, the father of modern psychology, wrote that "the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence." That faculty, at its core, is the very essence of mindfulness. And the education that James proposes, an education in a mindful approach to life and to thought. In the

1970s, Ellen Langer demonstrated that mindfulness could reach even further than improving "judgment, character, and will." A mindful approach could go as far as to make elderly adults feel and act younger—and could even improve their vital signs, such as blood pressure, and their cognitive function. In recent years, studies have shown that meditation-like thought (an exercise in the very attentional control that forms the center of mindfulness), for as little as fifteen minutes a day, can shift frontal brain activity toward a pattern that has been associated with more positive and more approach-oriented emotional states, and that looking at scenes of nature, for even a short while, can help us become more insightful, more creative, and more productive. We also know, more definitively than we ever have, that our brains are not built for multitasking— something that precludes mindfulness altogether. When we are forced to do multiple things at once, not only do we perform worse on all of them but our memory decreases and our general well-being suffers a palpable hit. But for Sherlock Holmes, mindful presence is just a first step. It's a means to a far larger, far more practical and practically gratifying goal. Holmes provides precisely what William James had prescribed: an education in improving our faculty of mindful thought and in using it in order to accomplish more, think better, and decide more optimally. In its broadest application, it is a means for improving overall decision making and judgment ability, starting from the most basic building block of your own mind. What Homes is really telling Watson when he contrasts seeing and observing is to never mistake mindlessness for mindfulness, a passive approach with an active involvement. We see automatically: a stream of sensory inputs that requires no effort on our part, save that of opening our eyes. And we see unthinkingly, absorbing countless elements from the world without necessarily processing what those elements might be. We may not even realize we've seen something that was right before our eyes. But when we observe, we are forced to pay attention. We have to move from passive absorption to active awareness. We have to engage. It's true for everything—not just sight, but each sense, each input, each thought. All too often, when it comes to our own minds, we are surprisingly mindless. We sail on, blithely unaware of how much we are missing, of how little we grasp of our own thought process—and how much better we could be if only we'd taken the time to understand and to reflect. Like Watson, we plod along the same staircase tens, hundreds, thousands of times, multiple times a day, and we can't begin to recall the most mundane of details about them (I wouldn't be surprised if Holmes had asked about color instead of number of steps and had found Watson equally ignorant). But it's not that we aren't capable of doing it; it's just that we don't choose to do it. Think back to your childhood. Chances are, if I asked you to tell me about the street where you grew up, you'd be able to recall any number of details. The colors of the houses. The quirks of the neighbors. The smells of the seasons. How different the street was at different times of day. Where you played. Where you walked. Where you were afraid of walking. I bet you could go on for hours. As children, we are remarkably aware. We absorb and process information at a speed that we'll never again come close to achieving. New sights, new sounds, new smells, new people, new emotions, new experiences: we are learning about our world and its possibilities. Everything is new, everything is exciting, everything engenders curiosity. And because of the inherent newness of our surroundings, we are exquisitely alert; we are absorbed; we take it all in. And what's more, we remember: because we are motivated and engaged (two qualities we'll return to repeatedly), we not only take the world in more fully than we are ever likely to do again, but we store it for the future. Who knows when it might come in handy? But as we grow older, the blasé factor increases exponentially. Been there, done that, don't need to pay attention to this, and when in the world will I ever need to know or use that? Before we know it, we have shed that innate attentiveness, engagement, and curiosity for a host of passive, mindless habits. And even when we want to engage, we no longer have that childhood luxury. Gone are the days where our main job was to learn, to absorb, to interact; we now have other, more pressing (or so we think) responsibilities to attend to and demands on our minds to address. And as the demands

on our attention increase —an all too real concern as the pressures of multitasking grow in the increasingly 24/7 digital age—so, too, does our actual attention decrease. As it does so, we become less and less able to know or notice our own thought habits, and more and more allow our minds to dictate our judgments and decisions, instead of the other way around. And while that's not inherently a bad thing—in fact, we'll be talking repeatedly about the need to automate certain processes that are at first difficult and cognitively costly—it is dangerously close to mindlessness. It's a fine line between efficiency and thoughtlessness—and one that we need to take care not to cross. You've likely had the experience where you need to deviate from a stable routine only to find that you've somehow forgotten to do so. Let's say you need to stop by the drugstore on your way home. All day long, you remember your errand. You rehearse it; you even picture the extra turn you'll have to take to get there, just a quick step from your usual route. And yet somehow, you find yourself back at your front door, without having ever stopped off. You've forgotten to take that turn and you don't even remember passing it. It's the habit mindlessly taking over, the routine asserting itself against whatever part of your mind knew that it needed to do something else. It happens all the time. You get so set in a specific pattern that you go through entire chunks of your day in a mindless daze (and if you are still thinking about work? worrying about an email? planning ahead for dinner? forget it). And that automatic forgetfulness, that ascendancy of routine and the ease with which a thought can be distracted, is just the smallest part—albeit a particularly noticeable one, because we have the luxury of realizing that we've forgotten to do something—of a much larger phenomenon. It happens much more regularly than we can point to—and more often than not, we aren't even aware of our own mindlessness. How many thoughts float in and out of your head without your stopping to identify them? How many ideas and insights have escaped because you forgot to pay attention? How many decisions or judgments have you made without realizing how or why you made them, driven by some internal default settings of whose existence you're only vaguely, if at all, aware? How many days have gone by where you suddenly wonder what exactly you did and how you got to where you are? This book aims to help. It takes Holmes's methodology to explore and explain the steps necessary for building up habits of thought that will allow you to engage mindfully with yourself and your world as a matter of course. So that you, too, can offhandedly mention that number of steps to dazzle a less-with-it companion. So, light that fire, curl up on that couch, and prepare once more to join Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson on their adventures through the crimefilled streets of London—and into the deepest crevices of the human mind. PART ONE CHAPTER ONE The Scientific Method of the Mind Something sinister was happening to the farm animals of Great Wyrley. Sheep, cows, horses—one by one, they were falling dead in the middle of the night. The cause of death: a long, shallow cut to the stomach that caused a slow and painful bleeding. Farmers were outraged; the community, shocked. Who would want to cause such pain to defenseless creatures? The police thought they had their answer: George Edalji, the half-Indian son of the local vicar. In 1903, twenty-seven-year-old Edalji was sentenced to seven years of hard labor for one of the sixteen mutilations, that of a pony whose body had been found in a pit near the vicar's residence. Little did it matter that the vicar swore his son was asleep at the time of the crime. Or that the killings continued after George's imprisonment. Or, indeed, that the evidence was largely based on anonymous letters that George was said to have written—in which he implicated himself as the killer. The police, led by Staffordshire chief constable captain George Anson, were certain they had their man. Three years later, Edalji was released. Two petitions protesting his innocence —one, signed by ten thousand people, the other, from a group of three hundred lawyers—had been sent to the Home Office, citing a lack of evidence in the case. And yet, the story was far from over. Edalji may have been free in person, but in name, he was still guilty. Prior to his arrest he had been a solicitor. Now he could not be readmitted to his practice. In 1906, George Edalji caught a lucky