

Living in the Now

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson February 22, 2016

Sometimes we say, referencing our mural, that we especially honor the common wisdom of all the world's great religions...and there is considerable common wisdom, although there are also major differences. Here is one piece of common wisdom. We should live in the moment.

“Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment,” said the Buddha, and Buddhism has the most developed technologies to do that.

“Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.” Said Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, of ancient Greece.

“In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present” is Lao Tzu's prescription for the Good Life, from ancient China

And Jesus told his companions, “Don't worry at all then about tomorrow. Tomorrow can take care of itself! One day's trouble is enough for one day.”

From Inda comes a Sanscrit Invocation which is in our hymnal and is a favorite of UU's: "Look to this Day, for it is life, the life of life. It is #419, and within it is this wisdom: For today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope." And our own Henry David Thoreau commented that, "You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. "

One of the things I think about all that "wisdom of the world's great religions" is...if it were easy, they wouldn't have to talk about it so much!

However, the World's great traditions are now wrong about the blessings of living in the moment. There is nothing as valuable to our own happiness and even physical well-being as the ability to "be here now", as the hippies used to say, to be able to focus on what is happening now without missing the trick because we are worrying about the future or re-hashing the past. Even modern medicine agrees, and recommends "stress reducing" practices like meditation, tai chi, or creative pastimes that absorb us like art, gardening, and music. Blood pressure goes down. Inflammation calms.... And people are happier and healthier.

But...it's hard. Here are some reasons why it is hard.

1. monkey mind Our brains were created to think. That's what they do best, and they don't really ever stop thinking. But we've got a mind as well as a brain, and the mind, which includes the "I" which has will and makes decisions, the mind can choose whether or not to pay attention to the

Brain. In the same way that parents tune out the chatter of that 2 year old who is so in love with her own voice, or that diners in a restaurant focus on their dining partner and not on what the waiter is saying to the patrons at the next table. Monkey Mind happens to even the most experienced meditators and focused people. There are way to tune it out.

2. A second and more complicated reason that we are not focused on the moment at all times is that we need to plan ahead...to think about the future, solve problems, and prepare ourselves. We don't instinctively prepare the way the bears just automatically find a den for the winter. So it can't really be said that it is appropriate for human being to always "live in the moment." However, there is a difference between taking an afternoon to visit one's financial advisor, or having a conversation with one's boss about the future of one's career in this company and spending the ensuing evening stewing in anxiety about the future and unable to focus on any other activity no matter how pleasurable. That difference has to do with how productive we are being...getting new information is usually productive but stewing is usually not productive, and also whether we are in control of our attention or not. Stewing, by definition, is out of control.

In the same way, it is one thing to enjoy going over family picture albums or remembering good times with old friends, or even giving a careful look at an old mistake so as to understand why it happened. It is something else entirely to find yourself longing for the "good old days" or ...here's that word again, 'stewing' over events or actions that can't be changed now.

When you find yourself in the past, ask...“is this productive?” “Am I enjoying this?” “Is my mind, my I, controlling my attention, or have I been captured by my brain?”

3. Finally, we inheritors of the Puritan traditions are especially prone, whatever our religious beliefs, to believe that our lives only have value because of what we do, and if we are not doing, we have no right to be. And since we can't be doing all the time, we turn to stewing, churning, worrying, and regrets. This belief that only doing legitimates our life is pernicious and damaging. We do have a right and a need, just to be. You are a child of the universe, here to experience this beautiful world and give witness to it. You have a right to be happy, to be content, to just sit and enjoy the present moment. You don't have to be doing all the time, and even when you are earning your bread or caring for your children or making the world a better place, you will be happier and healthier if you are simply present to that moment. The demonstrator who is enjoying the sunshine and the energy of the moment is happier and healthier than the one who is stewing in fury about life's injustices. The parent who is focused on the details of cooking is happier and healthier than the one who is rehearsing, yet again, what she wished she had said to her boss that morning. You get the idea.

So....how exactly do we learn to use our minds to ignore our always thinking brains, to be present to the days' tasks, and convince ourselves that we do have a right simply to be. Well, the gold standard of practice is mindfulness meditation...setting aside a few minuteseven 10-15 will do... every day to do

nothing except BE and to practice not paying attention to the stream of thoughts, worries, and nostalgias which our oh, so fertile minds produce. Giving ourselves that time is in itself, the cure to, “I’m only worthy if I’m doing something,” that pernicious aftereffect of a theology that none of us believe in. And it has been shown with magic of MRI’s that even 10 minutes of a daily meditation practice starts to change the brain and body in good directions.

But besides that 10 minutes, or, if you just can’t stand to meditate, here are some practices that also help.

Practice what the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh calls, “Doing the dishes to do the dishes.” That is, whatever the chore of your days...making the bed, cleaning the kitchen, hanging out the laundry, just do that. Focus on the task, not on yesterday or tomorrow. Find things to enjoy and appreciate. Warm water, crisp fabric, sunshine. Notice your hands and body and what they are doing. When you find yourself planning the next meal or feeling angry with someone...just tell yourself that that can wait for another time but right now, you are simply doing the dishes. When you tend your children or grandchildren, tend them, attend to them. talk to them and learn from them. Children, it goes without saying, are better than adults at living in the moment.

Practice being in the moment while cleaning up the kitchen, while playing with the baby, while brushing your teeth, while driving, even. Or, my current favorite, while walking the dog.

So most of you know that I became a dog owner a couple of years ago when my mom's dog was thrown out of Assisted Living. I was willing, but not eager to take on this duty of love, and what immediately changed my life was that he wanted his walk as soon after I got up in the morning as it was light. Well...that was my meditation time, my "me" time. No matter what crazy schedule my day held, I had kept the first hour of the day sacred for my own spiritual practices for about 20 years. And now...there's this dog...pant pant, wag wag, please please, who wants his walk.

I tried ignoring him. I tried retraining him. And eventually I gave in and walked him. I remembered the wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh's friend, which he writes about in his first book, "The Miracle of Mindfulness", which is still in print and still an excellent introduction to mindfulness. That friend, father of a young child and a new baby, and a husband and worker told his teacher that he had tried carving up his day into 'work time', and 'child time' and 'help with baby' time and 'wife' time, and then was resentful that there was no time for him, until he came to a realization. "It's all my time," and decided to simply be present to the moments of his only life. "It's all my time," I said, told myself that I would walk the dog to walk the dog and that, too would be a spiritual practice.

With some dogs, that might have worked well, but Mosby, raised as he was in senior housing with no other dogs, turns into a nightmare of tooth and claw and bark when he sees another member of his species, no matter the size. He also doesn't like pick up trucks. So a walk in the park with Mosby is not usually a peaceful endeavor. It involves being always on the lookout for other dogs and the neighbors they bring with them, so we can turn the other way. It involves

being ready, the minute a pickup truck turns into the street, to reel in his leash so he doesn't dash to his death under its tires in his zeal to protect me from whatever he thinks it's dangers are. You get the picture. I tried ignoring all this. Re-training him has gotten far enough that, about half the time we see other dogs, we can stay in their sight as long as copious treats are available and the dog and owner do not approach.

It's, let's just say, an odd meditation practice.

In thinking about this sermon, I realized that I should not think of it as a meditation practice, but as a life practice. The moments of our lives that we strive to be here in are, after all, not always a walk in the park, not always a matter of beautiful skies and interesting birds and crisp air. The Now we need to learn to be in has, after all, things that bother us, scare us, and of which we vehemently disapprove. And the practice is, then to deal with what needs dealing with and letting it go. To be on the lookout for trouble ahead without being anxious or angry about it. To be a good dog owner who accepts the dog for who his is and deals matter-of factly with what needs to be done. And who walks the dog aware of the day and not lost in anxious planning or helpless regret, and who is therefore open to the magic of life.

Finally, in our quest to be better at being present in the moment, it's good to notice the places in our life that that's easy. We become absorbed in creating art, perhaps, or in a sport, or...in listening to music. Because listening to music is so powerful, we've had Peter Mayer to help us with this service, and he is going to sing one last song, about that being-doing thing....let's enjoy it together.