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LIVING IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

It is popular now to proclaim: *Live in the present! Do not dwell in the past or worry about the future. Now is all that matters.* Many sages say to us: *Past and future are illusions.* It seems as though many of us misunderstand these ideas. This confusion perhaps stems from a cultural belief that time flows in a linear fashion. First there is past, then present, then future. Along with this idea comes the belief that moments and existence are composed of separate fragments—perhaps positioned next to one another—but not conjoined.

Many believe that the meaning and essence of moments can be experienced in a vacuum, each moment independent of the other. This view ultimately holds that reality is made up of free-floating parts. Such that if we just allow ourselves to be fully present in the current moment, and somehow dismiss past and future, all of our suffering, fear, and anxiety will disappear.

Another idea of reality leads to a different relationship with past, present, and future. This perception views time as a circular or concurrent river in which past and future are not illusions. They are very real, and in fact both past and future live inside the present. They contribute to the essence, nature, and meaning of the present. They flavor it.

For instance, when we stop to enjoy the fragrance of a flower in the present moment, we may believe we have completely disentangled ourselves from the complexities of past and future. On the contrary, the fragrance we are enjoying is very much an expression of past and future. This fragrance only exists because it is the consequence of a subtle dance, in the past, between many elements: soil, decomposing material, sunlight, rain, seed, and sprout, all cured together in a time dynamic we now call the past. That past is not gone, dead, evaporated, or meaningless. In many ways it is more alive than ever. It is flowering in the present, saying: *Look what I have become!*

Past opens up in the present in the same way with things that are unpleasant for us. The relationship of past to present does not change, regardless of how pleasant or miserable that past moment, or this present moment. Time's interweaving cares not for our human enjoyment. It brings us its bread, no matter our taste for its grain.

The flower's fragrance we enjoy this instant is also an expression of the future. This may be more difficult to grasp because we have been so deeply conditioned to believe that time is linear. So how can something that has not happened yet be real?

Understanding time as concurrent, as an interflowing miracle of life, we see that the future is not some mystic idea until suddenly we find ourselves in it, as the present. Instead, the future is now! How can it be real in the now? Because it is already being born by the present. No present moment exists without a pregnancy bearing forth the future in its womb.

It is as with a newborn baby. Do we say the baby is real, and exists, only in the moment when she is born physically out into the world? Only when we can experience a form of her we easily recognize? What of her almost 10 months of gestation? During that period do we say that she has not been born yet and so she is not real?

Her future existence in the world is already in process now, in the womb. What of that time before her conception? At that point she is even less recognizable to us because of our deep conditioning to believe only in what is physically tangible. Truthfully, though, this baby is already in process, even before conception. The lives of her mother and father are creating the conditions and ingredients that will lead to her conception, gestation, and birth. So the future baby is already becoming, already existing in our present, although in a form difficult to recognize for those whose ways of seeing are shaped in cultures based on the tangible. How far back in time can we take this process of her becoming? Forever! Each of her ancestral generations was literally making her, in each of their moments of being. She was alive in them even then.

Turning this perspective around, we can say that however far into the future we choose to imagine, that future moment already lives in the present, which is a womb gestating and giving birth to all that comes.

Back to the flower. Its fragrance we enjoy now is actually an indication or element of what it is to become. That sweet scent is the offspring of a process: the flower's life cycle. This means the current scent is evidence of a necessary aspect of the flower's never-ending transformation. A circle is turning; a cycle is doing what cycles do. That sweet scent will eventually turn into the sour scent of decay. But the decay that will occur in the future is already happening, in a hidden form inside the vitality of the flower in bloom. Its very sweetening is part of a process that leads to decay.

In this way, the flower's sweet fragrance of the present is both offspring of a process that has happened by the time we smell the scent, and ancestor to decay in the making. It is what must occur before decay becomes recognizable. It is the baby in the womb. It is ancestor

carrying its descendant future inside itself. The sweet flower scent is just a circle waving at us from a particular point along its circumference. Living within that same circumference is the scent of decay. We appraise the flower at its peak bloom as valuable, and the flower in its decay as worthless. Yet all of this is the same essential beauty we call life.

Truly living in the present is not about dismissing the past or future. It is not about forgetting, denial, avoidance, suppression, minimizing, or closing down a part of our sensory experience. It is the opposite. Being fully present is an openness that allows us to experience, recognize, and embrace the totality of the present. In this way, we become graced by all it has to offer, and we invite revelation and awareness to flicker into illumination, so that wholeness may dawn in us.

The present is pregnant with many things to come. It is offspring of many ancestors who we once recognized in the past, when past was present. Ancestors we now do not see because we are trained not to see. We must learn again to gaze at the woods and see not only its obvious face, but also the decay it is already becoming, and beyond that the blooms that will rise from that decay; and *before* all of that, the grasslands that gave birth to the woods.

This way of seeing, of being, can help us to appreciate the momentary woods in a new, more cherishing, honoring manner. Our reasons to love it increase. Our excuses for destroying it erode. For these same reasons, we should learn to behold a person and grasp the ancestors and life conditions that spawned and textured her, as well as the offspring life reverberations of future that she already is bearing in her figurative womb of being and living. She already *is* the soil, air, earth, and light she will one day more obviously become. All of this is her. Now. Right here.

This is no fairy tale. It is the tale's fairest unveiling. That person you care for? Loving him fully requires reaching with your heart into who he was and who he will be and gathering all of that up in your arms to embrace him now in who he is. Complete love can only give bear hugs. And bear hugs are strong because they use muscles that shatter time. When we receive a bear hug we know we are being loved deeply, in every dimension of time. We feel the child we were being loved. We feel the elder in us being loved. We feel our generations being showered in the warm rain of love.

Being in the moment is not so self-serving or small as mentally erasing future or past. It is a matter of opening, dissolving the perceptual walls encumbering our spirit, which wishes to grasp everything, always. Realizing and being touched by the wholeness of this person before us, the immediate and rich turbulence of past, present, future that she is, leaves us more likely to honor her, less likely to destroy her. This way of seeing, conceiving the all-ness of the present, ultimately blesses us with the dissolution of boundary and the brilliance of discovery that this person before us, and we, are the same flower wearing different faces in the dazzling, illusory funhouse of existence.

Yes, it is destructive to dwell on or be consumed in past or future. This does not mean that either is inherently a scourge to be avoided. Both are aspects of divine life. Past and future

are not illusions. In a sense, it is time that is the illusion. If we learn to drop the labels—past, present, future—and become cherishers of being, we will enjoy all the harvest offered us. This would seem preferable to stigmatizing certain crops (past and future), telling our children not to visit those rows, plots, or acres, then returning to the smallness of the *homes* we have built (living in a disconnected present) to a sleep disrupted by hunger pangs, starving daily when the feast is all around us, waiting to be had.

This self-imposed disconnect is like determining to journey deep into a desert, so that we may become fully present in that desert. Then we come across a lake in the desert, which violates our idea or expectation of what being in the moment should mean during this desert sojourn. In reaction, we say to ourselves: *I am going to go around this lake. No use dwelling on it. The lake is not a part of my present in the desert.* Unbeknownst to us the lake is the past of this desert. It is also entirely a part of our present in this desert. In fact, the lake used to be an ocean, which gave birth to this desert. Without this lake there would be no desert. Our present experience would be altered. Focusing on a present moment as though it were somehow “untainted” by past and future, causes us to miss many beautiful lakes of meaning and flowers of connection existing in the *right now*.

Experiencing past and future in the present is like allowing ourselves to experience the lake as a part of experiencing the desert. Why not stop and touch the water? We do not have to dwell on or drown in the water, but why avoid it entirely? It is an intimate part of this desert. Touching the water, we feel its wetness. We become wet. We’ve just become more consciously a part of the lake and therefore the desert. We have assumed their likeness. Now we better understand the past wetness living in the present dryness of this desert. Acquainting ourselves with the wholeness of this desert, we have just deepened our living in the moment!

One day may we learn to wonder at the ocean and witness the vast plains it once was, along with the desert it will one day be. May we enjoy the plains and desert as they both swim in the ocean, still alive, still being, presently. On that day, we will gain motive to honor all of life, and bathe in the truth of intimacy. Entirely.

We only end up dwelling on the past because we do not know how to relate to it while it is the present. When it is present, we choose to remain closed to its all-ness. We run away from it, attack it—particularly those aspects that are uncomfortable for us, threatening. We seek to minimize or inflate it in our perception, depending on our motive. Then, having not been honored in the present, it becomes our dishonored past, where it rears up and haunts us until we give it our honest attention. This is why truth and reconciliation are steps any human or society must take in relation to painful or traumatic experience. It is an inescapable requirement that we reckon with the truth. Now or later. Now is healthier. Later becomes more difficult, and increasingly critical. Disease springs from dishonored past unaddressed.

In the same way, dishonored future living inside the present eventually ceases to be future. Now it is the dominant present and it unleashes consequence on us. Any people we dehumanize now must be reckoned with now, in the present. Or their suffering will overflow and reach us hundredfold in the future that becomes today. Their generations are already being born and will become the offspring of our present treatment. Learning to treat people as fully human is not just for their sake. It is for our own.

Similarly, an earth that will one day revolt against our abuse exists already. It is in process today. In this present moment that is our *now*, we must face that future earth and reckon with our ways of being. It is through this sense of intimacy with the seasons that many traditional indigenous cultures have understood and heeded the responsibility we all have to past and future. They have grasped the reality that we are, in any and every present moment, the consequence of seven generations before ourselves and the determiners of seven generations following after ourselves. This is the Great Law of the Iroquois Nation and its essence has been taught for eons by other cultures that see life's oneness. They have taught this truth to their children as a matter of fact, sanity, and survival.

In the present live many ancestors and offspring, human and of nature and spirit, and they will have their recompense. Those who view the world as a composition of fragments, tend to take this idea of living in the present in an individualistic, hedonistic, self-serving manner. Those for whom time and moments are a boundless, formless, indivisibly intermeshed continuum tend to take living in the moment as a truth that bears social responsibility. They see that all that is, is all that ever was, is all that will ever be. They surrender to the all-ness and give it honor in their way of living. They touch the water and know they are being touched in return by the unending sky of being.

Being in the moment is not about closing ourselves down or shutting ourselves off, but opening ourselves up and out to infinite meaning offered from the orchard of each moment, an un-depleting bounty of perfectly ripened fruit. Being in the moment is not a matter of putting the moment on pause or freeze frame. It is a function of being still within, so that we can fully and freely enjoy all that the moment offers, because we ourselves have slowed down and let go. That the moment appears to slow down, become dreamlike the more we immerse ourselves in it, is not because time itself is slowing. It is because we have opened, and in opening, our senses become more acute and precise. We are no longer receiving only trickles of sensation and meaning, but the fuller waterfall. Time has not slowed. In fact, it has exploded. We are receiving all of it—past, present, future—at once; instead of just a meager linear stream.

When great artists, musicians, athletes, or surgeons experience that heightened state of awareness in which the situation seems to slow down and they are at their best, it is not because they have dismissed past and future. The moment seems to slow in their minds because they have given up the perceptual boundary between themselves and the world,

between time and reality. They have become the full rush of life and experience instead of just thought-managing their witness of life and experience.

Rather than dismiss past and future, they use those elements. Past and future inform their creative expression and performance in the present. They are aware of all that has gone into the nature of the present moment. They discern how the nature of the current moment may impact the outcome that is the impending future moment, whether that outcome is a microsecond or an hour away.

They have become seers in both backward and forward direction. More accurately, they have become seers in one simultaneous direction, which is no direction at all, because no true linearity exists. They have become seers in the sense of being awake, aware, knowing. To be content with seeing and realizing only what stands immediately before us is tempting. We believe it requires the least effort. In truth, it costs us the most. Intentional amnesia toward the past and willful blindness toward the future impacts us greatly: destruction and self-destruction, anxiety, stress, fear, dislocation, disconnection, despair, hopelessness, purposelessness. All these things and more erupt inside us when we choose to exist against the natural grain, which is wholeness, all-ness, and concurrence of being.

Perhaps the greatest artists, those most able to be open and diffused into the total moment, are children. When children discover something they have not seen before, or encounter something entrancing, they stop. They dive into that thing. Nothing of them is left outside of that thing. They are lost inside the brilliance of wondering. They want to know how that thing got to be what it is. They wonder what it will become. They do not unnaturally tell themselves: *Don't think about how it got this way or what will become of it.* They just allow wonderment to happen.

When they are filled up on wondering, they move on to the next moment of wonder. In a most healthy child, every moment is of wonder; the string is unbroken, continual. The less well the child, the less often she or he surrenders to wonder. The same of course is true of us.

Children are blessed with a pristine balance of contemplation. Their thoughts, feelings, and spirit travel freely according to the breeze of inspiration. Then they grow older. They become us. Trained into an unbalanced contemplation. Obsessing about the past—not really the past, but chosen elements of the past. Fixated on the present in an unnatural, forced, strained, anxious manner, as if saying: *I cannot think about anything but this moment.* Such attempts to control our focus are the opposite of surrender and opening. Instead we work ourselves into a nervous clinging to the moment. Clearly we are not enjoying the moment, or learning from the moment, or even realizing what the moment is.

If not obsessing about the past, or fixating on the present, we are terrified, anticipating the future. In our terror, we once again mistakenly assume we can assert control over the future.

The idea is to give the future birth by getting out of the way with our need for control. Through mindfulness and openness we choose to exist in the present in a way that becomes a clear vessel for the future to pass through as a healthier being. It is all being. What we call time is not an inert object. It is a being, it is life *being*.

Our healthful being gives birth to a future that is a healthy being. Our healthful honoring of the past gives birth to a healthy current being. This is all one being. Children in their blessed balancing of being, experience life in its fullest. Then we scold them out of that paradise and into the suffering and misery of managing life and moments. Attempting to manage that which cannot be managed creates suffering and despair. Learning to jump into the river of being (life) so that we enjoy its fullness, learn from its lessons, and travel where it offers to take us, this is being in the moment. This is letting go. This is the sweetest surrender.

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