

APPOINTMENTS WITH YOURSELF

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Don't mistake your schedule for your life

"Now" is an obvious word, but a tricky concept. As soon as you say "now," the now in which you said it has passed. Where did it go? It went that-a-way. Just like the now in which you said "Where did it go?" Thinking about "now" can make you dizzy.

We speak about "the present moment" and the ability to be fully present, and we claim a sort of smudgy understanding of what that means. But what *is* "the present moment? Seriously! "Be in the now." "Be here now!" "Be present." "In family life be *completely* present," says Laozi's *Tao Te Ching*(in Stephen Mitchell's New Age-ish translation)--a sentiment echoed in one way or another by every marriage counselor alive.

Americans have heard and used these phrases for about 40 years, as Eastern and New Age concepts influenced psychology and other 'ologies. We're all familiar with expressions like "right attention," "mindfulness," and family therapy's emphasis on what's happening *in this room right now*.

There have even been attempts to quantify the present. In Daniel N. Stern's *The Present Moment*, he states that "present moments last from 1 to 10 seconds with an average around 3 to 4 seconds," and submits this definition: "The present moment is structured as a micro-lived story with a minimal plot and a line of dramatic tension made up of vitality effects." Obviously, once you delve into it, *now* isn't as exact a word as it appears.

Finding the Present

The primary definition of "now" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "at the present time or moment," which, as we've just seen, isn't very useful. There's more utility in the dictionary's second definition: "in the present circumstances"--*that* spreads out "now" comfortably. We're not talking about one moment, or one perception, or 10 seconds; rather, we're talking about a kind of place within time, a "here," *these* present circumstances. "Here" as in: what we're presently engaged upon, in the place that we are.

So you're taking a walk, and the entire walk is "now." You're having a conversation, and the entire conversation is "now." You're making love, writing, cooking, telling a bedtime story--the entire act is "now." That's a manageable present, something that can be discussed without requiring the capacities of a Zen master.

A manageable present, but also complex and variable. You're taking a walk. In a park, say. And let's say you're an attentive person--you're not one of those people who walks staring down at their shoes. You notice birds, trees, clouds, kids playing, an aged person sitting on a bench, a couple walking hand-in-hand. It's nice, it's sane, you have the gently relaxed feeling that the world isn't ending at the moment; maybe soon, but there's

time enough yet for a walk in the park. Also, something worrisome and/or interesting is going on in your relationship and you're chewing on that.

The mind is a nonlinear organ: while you're mulling your thoughts and you're attentive to the comparative sanity of the park, something you see reminds you of something else and takes you away from your primary thoughts. "Now" you're in three places at once, at a leisurely pace: the park, the relationship, and the fact that kid over there's doing just what you used to do as a kid, or that you once had a dog like that dog this very pretty lady is walking, and you notice the lady, too. Thus "now" is continually expanding and contracting on your walk. It's a bird, it's a kid, it's a memory, it's your girl- or boyfriend, sometimes one at a time and sometimes kind of all at once--assuming, again, that you're having a decent sort of day, there's no particular crisis, and you aren't obsessing. Various things are going on all around you and within you, and you're walking in the park.

I take this walk-in-the-park kind of activity to be the state that the Zen poet Ikkyu described when he said: "so many people know but don't know they know/ walking to work talking to themselves" (Stephen Berg's translation, *Crow with No Mouth*). What do they know? They know how to be in the now. The trick is knowing that you know, which doesn't necessarily require years of meditation. The great mystics are always saying (infuriatingly) that the very big things are actually very simple. In this case, knowing that you know *is* simple. It doesn't require "enlightenment" (whatever that is); it requires only appreciation.

Add appreciation to this "now"--add, that is, a bit of consciousness, the awareness that, "Hey, this right here is pretty nice"--and your "now" expands to the whole walk, the whole park, the entire present circumstance. Presto, you're in the now! *If* you can appreciate it. If you can't, you may also be in the now, but you don't know it; that is, you don't appreciate it--and if you don't know it, don't appreciate it, you're not fully there.

So say you're walking in the park and appreciating it--it isn't over-the-top happiness, it isn't profound awareness, but it's pretty good. Then your cell phone rings. (We're assuming that, like many of us, you're foolish enough to take your cell phone on a walk in the park.) It's the significant other you've been thinking about, calling from another state where she (for the sake of argument) has been for a week on business or whatever, and she isn't due back for two more weeks. You're glad to hear her voice. She says she misses you. You sense that she expects you to say, in return, that you miss her. But what if you aren't missing her? That doesn't mean you don't love her. It's just that on this pleasant walk in the park, you aren't particularly missing her. It might be better if she was there, but she isn't, and she can't be, and she won't be, and it's still a good walk in the park without her. If you say, "I miss you, too," you're lying, and there's a flat dullness to that kind of little lie--it sours the moment; enough lies like that, and it sours the relationship. (As someone once said to me--a line I later stole--"Never say 'I love you' when what you mean is 'Good morning.'")

So she says "I miss you" and you don't want to say "I miss you, too" because, at the moment, you don't. But if you say, "I don't miss you," you're in trouble, and you're

hurting a person you don't want to hurt. What's "missing" anyway? It's a feeling that leaves a hole inside; it's a feeling that says, "The present circumstance isn't enough, even though it's all you have."

Missing is usually a sense of incompleteness, a lonely insufficiency of the self; when acute, missing can even feel like a kind of panic. Either way, missing arises out of a feeling that is more profound: longing. But longing--if you *allow* yourself to long for someone, if you *appreciate* the depth of the feeling--can be a lovely sensation. Missing leaves a hole; longing can feel full. You feel the longing filling you up, expanding your heart. And "I long for you" is so much more romantic than a perfunctory "I miss you, too." (If you actually do long for her, as a sort of constant undertow when she isn't around.)

It's difficult to appreciate missing, but not as difficult to appreciate longing. Missing whisks you out of the present circumstance; but a recognition of longing deepens and nuances the present circumstance. Again, it's that small thing, appreciation--to appreciate the moment you're actually experiencing, instead of faking a feeling you aren't having or allowing yourself to be preoccupied with missing a moment you aren't experiencing.

"Be here now" is pretty vague. "Appreciate, and don't fake," that's concrete. You may or may not be able to do it, but at least you know what it is. It may take time and trouble to learn how to do it, but at least you know whether you're doing it or not. "Do I appreciate my circumstances? If not, why not?" That's at least a starting point. "Do I do a lot of faking?" That's at least an answerable question. It may take a lot of work to answer it thoroughly, but it can be answered. Maybe you need the help of a therapist to answer it. Maybe you can figure it out, sooner or later, on your own. Either way, through these questions, you enter a mental and emotional territory the poet Rilke described: "*Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.*"

Frenzied Schedules

But it isn't so easy to "live the questions" in a multimedia, interactive era of cell phones and pagers in which we're expected to be constantly available--I've called it "The Age of Interruption." We've even devised nifty gadgets for interrupting ourselves, and never letting the present speak to us on its own terms. The iPod supplies a constant soundtrack wherever you are--background music to force the present into whatever mood, or pastiche of moods, you programmed into it. (We may not experience this as a form of interruption, but that's what it is, albeit self-induced.) For many of the young, cell phones and iPods are taken for granted, almost as biological appendages, and their concept of "the present" involves instant electronic connection to their friends and family at all times. Meanwhile, in our big cities, it's hard to be out of sight of some ad that exists for no other reason than to wrest your attention from the present to something you can buy. Life now is a kind of cacophony that's difficult to turn down and almost impossible to turn off.

The daily round has become frantic, for workers and homemakers alike--we need Day Runners just to keep track of what we're supposed to do! Each task interrupts the last, nothing one does feels fully completed, and many live their lives always a little panicky, as though late for an appointment. (The appointment they're really late for is an appointment with themselves.)

Jungian psychologist James Hillman told me once that in his clinical practice, he found that nothing was harder to "treat," to do therapy with and upon, than peoples' *schedules*. He said it was very difficult to get people to see that their schedule was their *life*--the skeletal structure of their existence. You're not going to change your life much unless you change your schedule: open it up so that the unexpected may enter. Else how can the present be a *presence* instead of just another goal--or just something else you don't have time for?

So when I write of a walk in the park, someone might be saying, "What are you talking about, who the hell has time for a walk in the park?!" Your weeks may be so oppressively scheduled that you never, or rarely, take the time for something like a walk in the park. In such circumstances, your inner life, which no one can avoid having, can get in the way and become something to be suppressed, not explored. Your *self* becomes a burden--a danger to the marriage, the children, the job. Ask questions like "Do I do a lot of faking?" "Do I appreciate my present circumstances, and if not ,why not?" and truthful answers could bring your life down around your head.

People in these circumstances rarely want to be "in the now," in the sense that we've been speaking of. Rather, they seek to lose themselves in their tasks so that they don't rock the boat. Their schedules become not something to be addressed and changed, but something in which to hide.

Living with Courage

Often the price of success, or the price of simply fitting in, demands not only conformity (the suppression of self) but passivity. And we can lock ourselves into conformity and passivity simply by, as the saying goes, "working hard and playing by the rules." For example, the average college student goes into massive debt to achieve a masters or doctoral degree. It's the work of a decade to pay off that debt, a decade during which one willingly accumulates many other obligations. Often by her mid-thirties, that Ph.D. recipient has a family and children. Sometime in her late thirties or early forties, the desire to be more her own person, more in charge of her own time, more "in the present moment" becomes urgent. How to do it? The possibility of breaking free, of fulfilling herself, seems slim to nonexistent. For many, the obligations they've bought into have compromised their inner lives beyond hope, and a genuine appointment with themselves can never be kept.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate your circumstances if those circumstances imprison. It's tough to learn not to fake if you're living a lie, or many lies, and if those lies have become the terms of your survival. For many people, that's "normal

life." Therapy can help you cope, and coping is better than nothing, but no one mistakes it for fulfillment.

For some, "the present moment" is nothing less than terrifying, when faced full on, without blinders, without apologies. The marriage is sunk in compromise, the job sucks, the children are an endless worry, and God doesn't respond. If even one of these aspects goes well--the marriage is alive, or the job is full of interest, or the kids are alright, or God is a comforter instead of a terrorist--then we are (as Southerners say) shitting in high cotton. Who wants to face "the present moment" in most circumstances? Better to watch TV. Videos or *Jeopardy*. Anything becomes better than an awareness of where you *are*. Anything becomes better than *not* faking.

But this is really nothing new. In a world far milder and more orderly than ours, Thoreau observed that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

The odds have always been against any individual who desires to live a free inner life--and a free inner life means not being afraid of, indeed relishing, the present moment. To buck the odds takes courage. To determine to find one's way through the societal maze to a place where "the present moment" can blossom requires not one but many small acts (perhaps large acts!) of courage. But "courage" isn't a fashionable word anymore; I can't remember the last time I heard anyone use it in conversation.

We don't tell each other, or ourselves, something our great-grandparents assumed: if you don't have a certain amount of courage, you can't live worth a damn in this world. Psychology, philosophy, religion, money--they won't help if you don't have any courage. But courage isn't necessarily something innate that one has or doesn't have; for most of us, courage is something that you learn, cultivate, grow into step by step, mistake by mistake--like love. Courage, like love or freedom, is something you have to *want*. Certainly, if you won't cultivate your courage, "be here now" is forever beyond your grasp.

"This was about courage," writes Doris Lessing in her *Golden Notebook*. "It's a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life, because injustice and cruelty is at the root of life. And the reason why I have only given my attention to the heroic or the beautiful or the intelligent, is because I won't accept that injustice and cruelty, and so won't accept that small endurance that is bigger than anything." We aren't speaking of anything grand. It takes courage to admit that you're unhappy, and still more to address that fact. It takes courage to decide you need therapy, and more courage to go through the process. It even takes a kind of courage to say, "Today, come hell or high water, I'm taking a slow walk in the park."

Blessings from the Past

All I can offer as a guidepost to the present moment is something that happened to me-- an element that helped me be "in the now," as that grating saying goes. And, for me, this step took what Lessing calls "a small painful sort of courage."

It involved memories. Memories "come up," as we say, all the time, in every kind of situation. The past adheres, in the form of memory, to most present circumstances. And, except when we're actually trying to remember, we're usually not in control of what we remember. Something reminds you of something and zap: you're remembering. A scent, a sight, a song can take you back decades.

As a writer, I'm perhaps especially susceptible to memory because there's a sense in which writing *is* memory. It may be argued that a writer works in the medium of memory even more than in the medium of language. For a writer, often the prime function of language is to serve, preserve, and transmute memory--as fiction, poetry, nonfiction, or even as thought. So I'm often preoccupied with the meaning of memory itself, and with the significance of specific memories.

Like anybody, I have many bad memories. Gradually, by hook or by crook, most of us learn to live with that. But I began to be bothered by this question: Why do good memories, wonderful memories, sometimes cause me intense pain?

Not all good memories, of course, but gorgeous memories like: when I was falling in love with Z. (and with several other letters of the alphabet); or moments of great happiness in my first marriage and my second (both long past); or a good memory of a dead or lost friend; or a rare good memory from childhood--excellent moments, rich with life. So why should they cause pain--so much pain, sometimes, that, lacking courage, I'd shut the good memories down?

I began to wonder why these good memories, memories that shouldn't be avoided but cherished, should wrench me away from an appreciation of *this* moment-- from the courage to be in this moment? The events evoked were anything but depressing or sad, so why should the memory of them depress and sadden me "in the now"? Because the romance or friendship or marriage later went bad. Because one good childhood memory brings up a dozen that were awful. What happened later colors the good memory and leaves a bad stain--the awful and ever-present fear of loss.

Even the good things that didn't go bad: a great bunch of kids I taught, whom I'll never see again; a marvelous adventure that I'll never have again; the sensation of being young (for I'm not young anymore and will never be again). Excellent times! Why should the sudden thought of them cause pain, and the fear of pain, in the present?

Because those times, those adventures, those loves, are gone forever. And I seem particularly sensitive to that, not in a sentimental or nostalgic way, but simply with a sense of irrevocable loss. That sense of loss, and fear of further loss, was clouding my present.

Then one day, something changed. I can't tell you why it happened or how; it just happened. On a street where I'd once walked with someone precious to me, someone whom I'd since lost, I "saw" (in my mind's eye) the two of us walking ahead of me, as we used to walk, smiling as we used to smile, with our old radiance. And instead of feeling

the pang of loss and fear of memory, I felt something very different, and I said softly but aloud: "Go well, my beauties."

The memory didn't wrench me out of the present, nor did it cause sadness and fear--it was poignant, yes, but in a sweet way. I knew everything that was going to happen to those people, some of it good, some of it not. I knew that, contrary to what they felt and thought then, one day, their paths would diverge forever. And what I felt was to wish them well. Both of them. He would one day turn into me, and she--I can't know whom she's become. But I wished them well. "Go well, my beauties." And that felt good *in that present moment*. And the memory faded, and the fear of loss faded, and I was right there on that street, in the present, with no past burden.

From that time on, when a memory arises, I see it clearly, and I say, softly or to myself, "Go well, my beauties." And the memory passes without wounding. I'm doing something *in the present* that relates to the past but isn't gripped by the past. My ghosts are welcome, and, being welcome, they quickly go elsewhere--they still have much to do. Because of this, my present feels vastly expanded. Memories are no longer interruptive or fearsome; they're part of the present, and I've found that when I've blessed them--"Go well, my beauties"-- good and bad alike leave a loveliness in my present air. It's as though the past is saying, as Jacob said to the angel, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me."

We cannot be in the present until the past lets us go. It'll never leave entirely; it must always return. I suppose it needs a lot of blessing. But, blessed, it'll let us go . . . and the blessing, because it occurs in the present, also blesses the present.

Just Being

In a life running from one sort of appointment to another, space must be made for appointments with oneself. This, too, takes that "small courage," but all talk of being "in the now" is pointless without unspecified appointments with oneself.

Some time ago, my friend and teacher, George, asked if there was any moment of the day when I wasn't *doing*. I said, "I meditate." He said, "That's *doing*. It's a specific effort with a goal." "Well," I said, "occasionally I'll just pour myself a cup of tea and stare out the window." He said, "Drink more tea."

It was a concrete suggestion; a way for me to spend some unscheduled time with me, in the present. A walk is good, too. (Not for exercise. Exercise is *doing*.) There are days when I'm all jangled with doing; when being in the present seems a distant memory. I suddenly remember George's "Drink more tea," and I make myself a cup of tea and just sit and sip a while. You sit and sip, the mind wanders (which is its natural state--the mind is a wanderer). It wanders back to itself, always. I find that I suddenly, again, *really am* where I am. In the present. And much more easeful about whatever comes next.

In Hillman's terms, George was "treating" my schedule.

Our schedules are enemies of the *presence* of the present--"officiating devils," to steal Heinrich Zimmer's term. "But," he also said, "the officiating devil is not very difficult to trick." You can trick it with a cup of tea, a walk, a question, a blessing, appreciation. *It isn't that complicated.* The really important things are simple, the sages like to say. It simply takes attention. Even the most harried person can sit a little while with a cup of tea. To be "in the moment" is within anyone's reach.

I've found that many people don't like to be told that. Makes them cranky. Nevertheless, it's within anyone's reach, the now, the true present, the expansive moment in which one meets oneself and does . . . nothing. "Just visit," as they say in Texas. Be with the moment, which (the Zen guys are right) is yourself.

You can do it. Have a cup of tea.

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