

Living – and Loving – in the Present Moment

By Greg Monk

Good morning, All-Faiths members and friends! It is good to be with you again this morning. Our theme this month is relationships – this week, I'd like to share a little of my experience on a topic I have found to be important in many areas of life – including relationships – being in the present moment.

When I first told my loving, supportive husband that I would be giving this particular message, his first response was, "Wait... You?" And he's not wrong. I have struggled with being present for most of my life – and I suspect I'm not alone. I guess, the question is, who would I rather hear a message from on almost any topic – say, Honesty for example – someone who has never really struggled with it, having been pretty honest their whole life, or someone who has discovered the immense joy and freedom, the release from the stress of always having to remember what you said to keep the lies afloat - that being honest can bring to someone who has lived a life of being dishonest?

For myself, I almost no experience at living in the present moment as a child, or for much of my adult life. I thought I did – in fact, I thought I was better at it than everybody else; I didn't worry about the past or the future at all. I escaped such depressing thoughts by throwing myself into a single-minded goal of making sure Greg was having fun. But I was confusing living IN the moment, for living FOR the moment. Big difference.

As I went "straight" (so to speak) from my mother's care to the military, there were certain adult responsibilities – like paying rent, making financial decisions – really, making almost any decisions – I was able to avoid, so I wasn't really prepared for life as an adult civilian. For example, I operated for years under the mistaken belief that 100% of my paycheck was disposable income – and I disposed of it pretty well, I must say. My financial plan was, if you don't actually open your mail, you don't have any bills. This works, until it doesn't, and people start taking your things away, it turns out.

So, a certain amount of paying attention to the past and the future is certainly important. After all, we need to learn the lessons of our past if we wish to grow beyond repeating the same mistakes over and over. And being aware of, and

planning for the future, makes sense, both financially and emotionally... To a point. But perhaps the challenge is in finding the balance.

I believe that far too many of us can easily get caught in the trap of spending too much time either dwelling on the mistakes and the regrets from our past, or worrying about and trying to address problems of the future before it has actually arrived.

And we are encouraged in this by society and the environment, in which most of us live. Our technology is constantly multitasking, with several applications, running at the same time, and perhaps we believe we should be the same. I have often told people my mind is like my computer... I have 14 different windows open, five of them are frozen, and one of them is playing music, and I can't shut it off. But I am not a computer. The truth is, each time I switch my attention from one task to another, I need to reorient myself to the new task, and my stress levels rise, my ability to complete a task decreases.

Many of find ourselves very busy, trying to make ends meet and fulfill all of our social obligations, sometimes all at the same time. and our media reminds us regularly, in increasingly dire tones about the challenges that face us in our future. Given all of that, it can be very difficult to find that calm, that peace of mind of simply being present.

But increasingly, as I age, I am discovering the importance of being mindfully present. I have experienced the blessings of that state of being, as well as the consequences when I am not there.

Many of our relationship troubles, I believe, stem from a lack of simply being present. Besides the usual challenges of hearing that come as we age, I also suffer from "selective hearing" – I occasionally leave the room, though you might not immediately realize that. Not only does that make communication difficult, it can send a message that what you are saying isn't as important as what I am thinking about, which can lead to sour feelings pretty quickly, I've discovered. Everyone wants to feel important to someone, to be respected, and I don't always realize how disrespectful it can feel to be ignored ... until it happens to me.

I had a conversation once with an older man I was trying to assist in recovery, about his neighbor. He lives in a high rise with a lot of other people, and one day, a couple greeted him by name in the lobby – he was embarrassed to realize he

didn't know their names, though they lived in the building. He asked me, "is it because I'm getting old? Maybe I have Alzheimer's!"

I was quick to assure him that wasn't the case. I told him he simply didn't have room in his head for that information, due to all the rest of the buzz. Like many of us, he had mastered the art of polite conversation, nodding at all the appropriate moments, without really being present. If he could quiet that buzz, as his neighbors have, he'd be better equipped to be mindful, and present – and would also be able to remember his neighbor's names.

The present moment is also the only place where I can actually accomplish anything. As author Myrko Thum tells it, the present moment is all there truly is:

"The present moment is the only thing where there is no time. It is the point between past and future. It is always there and it is the only point we can access in time. Everything that happens, happens in the present moment. Everything that ever happened and will ever happen can only happen in the present moment. It is impossible for anything to exist outside of it."

As the reading mentioned, if I'm to fully live, to experience life, I need to be here. I can - and should - learn lessons from the past – but I can't go back and change anything. So, it does little good to dwell there long. Similarly, the future is a place that hasn't happened yet, so although I can take action now in the hopes of a better future, obsessing about the possible outcomes of those actions does me little good – in fact, it robs me of precious time in the here and now.

Many of us, too, are prey to negative emotion, especially given current events. And failing to stay in the present moment will usually add to the problem. I've been told I have a gift of turning a single tree into an entire forest - and then getting lost in it. Let me give you an example of both the problem – and a solution. One of my first jobs in early recovery was as a dishwasher for a country club in Minnesota.

One afternoon, they hosted a rather large wedding – some 400 in attendance – and as the dinner dishes began to be rolled back into the kitchen, I gazed in increasing horror at the rapidly expanding colossal pile of dirty dishes – surrounded by a growing sea of alcohol and food particles floating along the

stainless-steel countertops. I couldn't take it. I threw my apron to the ground, and stormed out, fully prepared to quit.

Fortunately, there was a phone on the wall, and I stopped to call my spiritual advisor, to explain my decision. When he hinted that my departure might be a bit abrupt, I responded with, "But you don't understand! I have 400 dinner plates to wash! And 400 salad plates and 400 saucers, and 400 bowls, and 400..."

He stopped me in my tirade. "No, you don't", he replied. "You only have one plate to wash. And when that plate is clean, you only have one more plate to wash." Somehow, that trick worked – by narrowing my focus, to only what was in front of me at the moment – after all, I could only wash one tray of dishes at a time – I could acknowledge that although there was much work to be done, I only needed to take care of what I could do in the moment.

I kept that job, and have been employed ever since – and I have often had to use that trick; whether it be one file at a time, or client at a time, I can stay more fully present – and not let the future overwhelm me. Last week, I had to drive to St. Petersburg, and I'm, none too fond of the Sunshine Bridge; a bit too tall for my tastes. But I've learned that by simply lowering the sun visor, which cuts off my view of the towering cable poles overhead, I'm able to relax – just by focusing only on what is front of me.

Another trick I've learned to stay present in conversation is eye contact. Eastern philosophies, now coming back in vogue here in the Western world, often talk about the mind-body connection – that what happens in one affects the other. Have you ever noticed that when someone drifts away mentally, dwelling in the past or in the future, their eyes drift, too? By focusing my eyes on the person speaking or the event happening, I've learned I can help my mind return to the present moment as well.

I've also learned the hard way, that if I want to start living in the present moment, I need to let go of how I think things should be and accept them for what they are. I cannot control everything that happens around me, no matter how much I want to, or how much I believe it would be better if everything and everyone would simply follow the script in my head; sometimes life is simply going to be different than how I want it to be. Practicing acceptance has helped me let go of the things in my life that are out of my control.

For me, because this was so challenging, I had to do this literally – I was instructed to make a Godbox. Basically, a container, the design of which was up to me, in which I could physically put all my fears and concerns for the future, and regrets of the past. I was to write them down on scraps of paper and put them in the box – a physical act of surrender, giving them up to ... the Universe, whatever Power I wished to conceive of. Once in the box, whatever was on that paper was no longer my concern.

The results were amazing – not only did I immediately feel better, freer of the obstacles to living in the moment – but a year later, when I opened that box and read what I had written, I was astonished by how many of the things I fretted about were taken care of, often without any help from me. This is my current box. My first one was much, much larger.

And because I am, by nature, a very busy person, my mind naturally wants to jump to the next thing I'm doing, preventing me from fully experiencing the thing I'm doing now – and the people I'm doing them with.

Anyone else have occasional trouble remembering where you set down your keys? Or your cellphone or glasses? How much of that is due to the fact that, at that moment, our minds had already moved on to the next task? Anyone else experience restlessness – even sitting or lying down? Although the body might be at rest, the mind might not yet be – or vice-versa; I've had a few nights where my mind wants to nap, but my legs wanna go for a stroll. Sometimes, it seems the thing to do to return to the present, to that state of calm is to simply ... stop.

In seeking solution, I was introduced to Samatha meditation – when I first saw this, I asked, “Who is this Samantha person, and why is a meditation guru...?” Samatha meditation (pronounced sha-ma-tha) meditation is a Buddhist practice on calming both the mind and body – it seems that to be effective, both must be considered. Perhaps we could try a brief exercise right now. If everyone would sit up straight – imagine a string being pulled through the center of your spine, aligning very vertebrae so that they are all stacked vertically. Imagine, like a puppet, that string is holding you vertical, and let everything else just relax.

Now, close your eyes, and just repeat this mantra, silently to yourselves – “I am here... it is now... I have arrived... (pause) I am here... it is now... I have arrived.”

As you repeat this to yourself, listen – to the music your own body is creating. I’ve learned that I emotionally respond to music. Your heartbeat, your breathing – all have a rhythm all their own. Focus on that, while repeating the mantra. “I am here... it is now... I have arrived.”

Anyone notice a shift in awareness? A change in your sense of yourself, your surroundings? The people next to you? That was less than two minutes of meditation, of just allowing ourselves a pause, to consider the present moment.

For those of us who like walks in nature, taking the time to open ourselves to the full sensory experience – the sights, sounds and smells, the feeling of the air, can have the same effect. Even in the city, in your workplace or walking through the mall, taking a minute or two away from the agenda of the moment, and just ... being, can reset a whole day’s worth of built-up stress. We can get so caught up in the destination, we forget to enjoy the journey along the way.

In these increasingly turbulent times, we, each of us, need those moments of calm and serenity. We need to get better at surrendering those things we can’t control. And we need to find the strength, though our connectedness to ourselves, to each other, and to the world around us, to effectively live life, enhance our relationships, and be the force of positive change we wish to be. And in the present moment is the only place, and the only time, we can. May it be so.

We have a tradition of telling a joke right before the offering, because we believe that humor, and laughter, makes us more generous. So here is my offering:

Three devout Catholics from different orders - an Augustinian, a Franciscan, and a Jesuit - all die and go to heaven. Jesus asks each one: "If you could go back, what would you change about your life?"

The Augustinian pondered and then said, "There's so much sin in the world. If I went back, I'd try and stop people from committing so much sin."

The Franciscan thought a bit before saying, "There's so much poverty in the world. If I went back, I'd try and get people to share more of their wealth with the poor."

The Jesuit looked at Jesus and said, "If I went back, I'd change my doctor."