

Living in the Now

One of the issues I hear much about in the therapist's chair and experience myself is the busyness of life. We all seem to desire deeper and more meaningful relationships but few of us seem to have schedules that would allow for deeper anything. Most of us have more than packed calendars full of vocational duties, familial obligations and many items in between that have to be done in any given week. Our homes require cleaning, our refrigerators need stocked, our bills must be paid on time and often there are not enough hours in the day to fully complete our mental to do lists and be able to place our heads on our pillows and unabashedly rest. Living this kind of life often keeps our minds running in overtime. We often can't enjoy what is in front of us and connect to the moment because we are far too burdened thinking of the future and what needs to happen or regretting the past and how life didn't work the way we needed it to. Often we move from place to place, accomplishing task after task on our to do lists, but miss out on the depth of life that is waiting for us in the present moment. As the sage philosopher Ferris Bueller once said, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

What might happen for us if we were to stop and look around? Is it possible that we might become unburdened and begin to experience life in the moment? In our high-speed world full of fast-paced relationships can we actually connect to what or who is present before us and experience life as it unfolds?

The Challenge of Living in the Now

As most people, I too wrestle with connecting with life's moments and being present in relationships. At times I find myself pondering the past and how it shaped me, or thinking about the future and how I may be able to interact with the world in a way that gets me what I want out of life.

This usually looks like dwelling on a former circumstance that didn't go my way, analyzing all the angles and replaying the experience over and over in my head. The next step that often keeps me from being present is pondering the future and how I might behave or interact in a way that might bring me a different outcome. Unfortunately this cycle of living in past regrets or fantasizing of the future keeps me from ever experiencing the life that is right before my very eyes. Like my body is too busy running from place to place hoping to suck every last drop out of life, my mind is too busy regretting or scheming to connect to what is happening presently.

Living inside my head and outside of the now forces me to miss out on the present moment, therefore rendering my desires to connect with others futile. When I over analyze the past or over think how to manipulate my future, I am not actually present in the moment to fully accept the care of others even if it were to show up. I miss out on the only real opportunity any of us really have, right now.

I realize that I am not alone with my difficulties. When I ask clients if they can identify what they are feeling during therapy an overwhelming majority answer that they cannot. People often recount difficult events as if they are telling someone's story other than their own. When I ask the question, "Are you emotionally connected to the words you just stated," the answer is often, "Not at all." People often say that connecting to what is actually happening in the very present is too uncomfortable to bear. How can it be that we can go through life rarely experiencing the only time that we really have, which is the present?

Could awareness of the now bring a whole new lens in which we view life? Might our past wounds mend and current burdens be made lighter if we embrace the very moment in front of us?

The Risk of Living in the Now

Often what holds us back from taking the plunge into the depth of our present relationships is the uncomfortableness of living life so intimately. Make no mistake; fully connecting to others in relationships is often parlous.

Many of us have learned from our past experiences that relationships are often unsafe and to protect ourselves from further hurt we do not offer our true selves presently in relationships. If we were to show up, we would then be forced to deal with the real messiness of living in community and the idea that we might be let down, hurt or even rejected. Simply put, connecting deeply with others in the moment is risky.

We find that our impulse is to break away from eye contact. We are uncomfortable with the idea of fully stating our real thoughts and feelings. Our very bodies often tell us how nervous we feel at the idea of connection in the now as our hands yearn to fidget and our stomachs are often tied in knots. The risk in moving forward into deeper connection often keeps us stuck.

The truth of the matter is we have only two options. Our first is to continue to live out of protective postures that thwart us from actually connecting and having our relational needs met. This is, of course, the path of least resistance and such is the road we often choose. Our other choice is to move forward in risking to offer ourselves for who we really are, including the good, the bad and the ugly. In reality, truly being in relationship means to opening yourself up to the possibility of deep connection but also deep wounds.

One of my favorite pastimes as a child was riding my bicycle. The black and blue metal frame and the obscure words Night Chaser printed down the body in a font that resembled lightning will be a memory that will never fade. When recalling my time on it I am always reminded of the feeling of freedom as I rode with the wind against my face, moving at what seemed the speed of sound down the hill past my childhood home. During the summertime one would be hard-pressed to find me anywhere but on my bike. This was not always the case, as I had much fear and trepidation when it came to learning to ride.

You see Night Chaser did not come with training wheels. Nervous of falling and becoming black and blue, I chose to let my black and blue bicycle sit in the garage for some time before I gathered up the courage to jump on and risk learning how to ride. This pressure was compounded due to the fact that at the time it seemed everyone else in the entire universe already was proficient concerning the maneuvering on a bike. This left me with the option to sit at home and watch from a distance as all my friends joyously rode their bicycles or risk wrecking and jump on and give it a try.

I remember the anxiety and fear that came with learning to ride, as it often does when risking doing new things. The many times I fell off and suffered scratched knees, busted elbows and a bruised ego. There was much jeopardy involved in learning to ride. To be honest, I don't recall the exact moment I was able to remain upright for more than a few seconds. I don't remember feeling particularly relieved or un-burdened once I learned to actually ride. What I do remember is all the time after I learned spent actually riding. When I think back I recall all the time spent on the seat of Night Chaser rather than the few amount of times I hit the ground. In the grand scheme of things, the risk is not what has stuck to my bones, but rather the time spent enjoying the ride.

The Benefit of Living in the Now

We all on some level desire relationships that are full of care, intimacy and connection. We long for our loved ones to fully engage our stories and be genuinely curious about how our day has been. In friendships we look for

those who not only share common interests but also those with whom we feel a sense of connection. As adolescents, our desires are for our parents to attend to us and maintain the role of safe caregiver, full of unconditional positive regard.

The challenge that comes with relationships is that if we haven't experienced safe community in our past or practiced living in the depth of the moment, the vulnerability of connection can feel foreign and overwhelming. Communicating desires and navigating conflicts in a way that is connected to the present takes time to learn and foster.

The "Now" may seem abstract and difficult to maintain, but if practiced it leaves an impact on our souls like little else in our modern world. When fully present during conversations among friends we can receive their care and be able to reciprocate truth and care back to them in a way that is deeply satisfying and relationally edifying. When aware of ourselves in the present moment we are able to fully enjoy the moments of life that bring us tears of joy and soul saturating laughter. When we experience life as it is happening we are able to feel the depth of our needs not getting met and appropriately grieve rather than bottling up our loss.

Living in the now produces lives that are rich with joy and possibility. We can become aware of our needs and find relationships can actually meet them. Upon entering into the present moment life can be experienced for what is really there and we find a peace that is present if we would but take hold of it. We are able to let the past be forgiven and tomorrow worry about itself.

If we never fully engage what is happening to us in the moment, we are missing out on real life. Being able to connect to others in a simple yet deep way is full of risk but can lead to awareness of our longings and fulfillment of our desires. May we boldly hop on, fall off, get back on and ride.

– D. Jeremiah Simmons