



SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS for Therapists and Other Healers

LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT by the Rev. N. Graham Standish, PhD, MSW, MDiv, MA

A bi-monthly series of reflections to help therapists and other healers integrate spirituality into their practice by introducing them to foundational spiritual themes and topics that aren't commonly taught in psychotherapy. These are rooted in Graham's 30+ years of advanced spiritual study, teaching, pastoring, and serving as a spiritual director.

Centering Prayer (start with a time of quiet centering, then read the prayer)

Gracious God, you know that I want to experience your presence in my life. How do I do that when I struggle to be aware of you throughout my life? I spend so much of my life either lingering on past hurts and slights, or worrying about a future that may or may not happen. Help me to open to you in you here and now so that I can discover you anytime and anyplace. Amen.

Reflection

It was Lent of 2005 and I was leading a small group devoted to spiritual growth. We were discussing *The Sacrament of the Present Moment* by the 18th-century Jesuit priest, Jean-Pierre de Caussade. For 100 years after it was written his book was shared only in secret because its central theme seemed so radical—that we can experience God's presence intimately by intentionally rooting our lives in the present moment. The church of the mid-1700s was wary of personal spiritual experiences outside of worship, the sacraments, and church-sanctioned events. Finally, when it was finally published in 1861, it created a buzz. People were hungry for de Caussade's teaching that God is found in *this moment* when we are awake, aware, and ready for it.

Our small group was having a very 21st-Century struggle with de Caussade's message. They wondered how to live in the present moment when we're expected to learn from our past while being forward thinking. The one who struggled the most was a medical doctor: "How am I supposed to live in the present moment? I mean, I have to schedule appointments. I have to prepare for things to come. I have to make investments for when I retire."

I tried hard to explain what she wasn't grasping: "You know, living the present moment doesn't mean you can't have a calendar and set up appointments. It doesn't mean that you can't make investments. Living in the present moment simply means refusing to fixate your thinking, your projections, your emotions, and your focus on what hasn't happened yet. Preparing for the future can be done while living in the present. It's a matter of trying to live purposefully in openness to God's presence and guidance, even if we're scheduling for the future." That didn't make much sense to her, but she agreed to keep praying to God about being present in the present.

C.S. Lewis wrote about living in the present moment in his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*. The book, written from the perspective of a demon, Screwtape, trying to keep a man from growing spiritually says, "The humans live in time, but [God] destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity."

The great 20th-century theologian, Paul Tillich also wrote about this, describing it as *the Eternal Now*. For him the Eternal Now is a place and time where we experience God personally and in awe because we become so aware of God's deep presence everywhere.

Even Master Oogway, the mystical turtle from the children's film, *Kung Fu Panda*, speaks about living in the present moment: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift... that's why they call it the present."

A struggle most of our clients have is that many, if not all, live almost completely in past pain or future fears. It's easy to recognize how they live in the past. We listen to their stories of past torment and sometimes trauma. We hear how they've felt trapped by past experiences. We see how past pain and patterns plague them. We experience how cynical and pessimistic they can be about the present. Much of our craft is lessening the power past pain has to permeate the present.

A bigger issue for most people, though, is how much they live in the future. This was the struggle for the doctor mentioned above. She wasn't just preparing for the future. She was living in the future by constantly worrying about it. Living in the future can do just as much harm as living in the past. Future obsession makes us anxious. We worry about *what ifs*: "What if I do this and it doesn't work? What if my plans fall apart? What if I don't get the job? What if she rejects me? What if I put myself out there and it all ends up the way it always ends up? What if the economy, my health, the country fall apart?" Living in the future means living anxiously. Living in the present lets go of anxiety. It doesn't mean that I don't care about the future. It simply means I won't be controlled by my fears about the future.

Jesus' emphasized living in the Now: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear.... So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:25, 35).

The present moment is the time and place where people experience God, Christ, the Spirit, the Divine, the Universe. It's where they become more sensitive to God's subtle voice. A significant part of living in the present moment is becoming awake and aware to life around us simply as it is, rather than what the past has taught us it is or what future fears say it could turn out to be. Living in the Now means developing a greater sense of openness to possibility and pleasure.

We've all experienced these moments but often unexpectedly: a captivating sunset, an engrossing movie, an enlightening conversation, a soaring piece of music... The question spiritually is can we intentionally let go of the past and the future to live in the Now on a regular basis?

Doing so requires intention and awareness. There are specific practices we can engage in that help us live in the Now. One is practicing gratitude by being aware of blessings in our lives and actively thanking God for them. Another is having ongoing conversation with God. Another is engaging in centering prayer and stillness that help us let go of the past and future to simply be in the now.

Living in the present moment isn't easy because anxiety always stalks us. Still, as the great 19th-century Quaker spiritual writer, Hannah Whitall Smith said in her *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, "Remember always that there are two things which are more utterly incompatible even than oil and water, and these two are trust and worry."

Ideas for Intervention

How do we do help people live more in the present moment? Several thoughts:

- *Explore with your clients the ways they are trapped in the past or the future.*
- *Encourage your clients to be more open to the good in every present moment, and to the possibility of good even in bad present situations.*
- *Explore with your clients moments where they have sensed God's presence or holy moments, and explore what was going on in those moments that opened them to the experience.*