

We spend too much of our time regretting the past or worrying about the future. The key to personal and interpersonal effectiveness? Stay in the present.

ACTING ON PURPOSE:

The Importance
of Being In
The Present

By Don E. Hall, Ph.D.
Partner, The Telein Group, Inc.
Illustration by William Campbell

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The Telein Group, Inc. • teleinhq@telein.com • www.telein.com • 001-714-952-4444



Vision Integration Abundance



We spend too much of our time regretting the past or worrying about the future. The key to effectiveness, both personally and interpersonally, is to *stay in the present*. Easier said than done, though, since most of us spend but brief moments appreciating the present – more often than not, we are dwelling on the past or musing about the future.

We all know that, sometimes, the transfer of past learning to current situations can be expedient and appropriate. Experience is a valuable teacher and applying it to a current problem can be a useful tool. As for looking forward, predicting and speculating about the future and anticipating results are often important elements of decision-making.

At the same time, living in the past can be ineffective and even dangerous, and speculating the future can be folly. Whether we focus upon the past or the future, it is important to remember that nothing is static – *everything is in flux*.

The Story

The Zen proverb of *The Monk on the Rope* illustrates the challenge of seizing the present. A monk is faced with a conundrum as he clings to a rope halfway down a cliff. The rope is attached to a tree at the top of the cliff. At the cliff's edge, a mouse is gnawing away at the rope, representing the passage of time. At the bottom of the cliff, by the foot of the rope, sits a ferocious lion with its jaws open, reminding us of our mortality. In front of the Monk, halfway down the cliff face, a luscious strawberry is growing.

The Monk is in a quandary as he contemplates going back up the rope – *to the past*. He experiences regret and feels anger at himself for beginning this journey. When pondering the prospect of climbing down the rope – *to the future* – he worries and is fearful that he will meet certain death. The Zen learning is to eat the fruit of the present and not to be distracted by the past or the future.

The Gnawing Mouse of the Past

Past conditions are never exactly the same as today's. Thoughts and emotions are the results of past thinking and feeling that never duplicate current circumstances.

A different nuance could be critical to an effective interpretation. Past learning and assumptions brought forward to the present can seduce us into prejudicing the fresh situation. As a result, our options are reduced and new approaches are tainted, blinding us to creative responses. Regret and anger are feelings often associated with the past that can quickly land us in the “red zone” of counter-productive behaviors.

On the other hand, suspending, focusing on the present and acting on a fresh situational assessment leading to deliberate action moves us into the “green zone” of productive behaviors.

The Fearsome Lion of the Future

The future is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. Projecting, predicting and planning activities make sense in anticipating the future. However, the downside of future-focusing (or obsessing) are the emotions of worry and fear with accompanying behaviors of indecision and paralysis. Again, the antidote to the “dis”-ease of fear and anxiety is acting on purpose based on a thorough diagnosis of present circumstances.

Healing Occurs in the Present

When we begin to sense fear or anger it can be helpful to follow the feeling upstream to the source. (It is interesting to note the word source is the French word for spring). Often by exploring the origin of these feelings, they unravel, becoming less of a negative influence.

Among the many things Dr. Balfour Mount, a Montreal palliative care practitioner of more than 30 years, has learned from his patients is living in the present. “One of our problems is that we're stuck in the past or the future. Healing occurs in the present moment, where we almost never are.”

Staying in the present can be enhanced through the discipline of meditation, although there are other ways of being in the present without the distracting noise of thoughts and feelings of the past and future.

Effective dialogue depends on staying in the present. Central to the practices of respecting, voicing, suspending and listening is attending to the present.

Living in the moment allows us to establish proportion. So often our lives are fragmented as we juggle personal and professional activities. The following essay captures the value of being in “the moment.”

I'd Pick More Daisies

If I had my life to live over,
I'd try to make more mistakes next time.
I would relax. I would limber up.
I would be sillier than I have been on this trip.
I would be crazier.
I would be less hygienic.
I would take more chances.
I would take more trips.
I would climb more mountains,
swim more rivers, watch more sunsets.
I would eat more ice cream and less beans.
I would have more real troubles
and fewer imaginary ones.
You see, I am one of these people who lives
prophylactically and sensibly and sanely,
hour after hour, day after day.
Oh, I have had my moments and,
if I had it to do over again,
I'd have more of them.

*In fact, I'd try to have nothing else—
just moments, one after another,
instead of living so many years ahead each day
(italics added).*

I have been one of those people who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat and a parachute.

If I had it to do over again,

I would go and do and travel lighter.

If I had my life to live over,

I would start barefooted earlier in the spring and stay that way until later in the fall.

I would play hokey more.

I would ride on more merry-go-rounds.

I'd pick more daisies.

*Adapted from an essay
by Don Herold*

Living the present means looking at the world as if for the first time. Be aware of everyday common things. Notice the beauty of nature. Look for the goodness in people. Attend to your body. Appreciate music, art and literature. Be with children.

We must remember to eat the fruit right in front of each of us! Acting on purpose is sweet, natural, fun and consuming as we complete our lifework. Consuming because as we focus on the present we lose our sense of time – past or future. We live in the moment when we experience a beautiful piece of music, become totally focused in an athletic activity or are absorbed in our work. Only then can one begin to *forgive the past and trust the future*. Calm the mouse and tame the lion by practicing being more in the present.