

PAST, PRESENT and FUTURE

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In 1970, Kris Kristofferson released the country music ballad "Help Me Make It Through The Night". The number of women offering Mr. Kristofferson, then in his physical prime, whatever help he had in mind may have been the largest such flood of female volunteers in the history of pop music. While I am not a very good judge of such things - not that there would be anything wrong if I were, mind you - it seems to me that Mr. Kristofferson has aged very nicely indeed; even so, when he performs the song nowadays I doubt he gets the hormones racing the way he used to. Cruising speed would be more like it, I suspect. Still, there was a line in that song that it seems to me has a lot of staying power, and in fact has gained a great deal in persuasiveness in the intervening years: "Yesterday is dead and gone and tomorrow's out of sight." Lately it seems to me that there has been a mighty surge of religious leaders, psychologists, and self-help gurus singing the praises of 'living in the moment' as the key to happiness and spiritual fulfillment.

This poses a serious challenge to many of us at this time of year. Does our singing 'Auld Lang Syne', and making resolutions to change our future behavior, really imperil our chances at joy and the evolution of our souls?

Some of the problem may simply be that so many of those disparaging the 'dead and gone' past and the 'out of sight' future are Californians, and live in a climate where talk of 'living in the moment' seems to make sense even in January, whereas hereabouts people very commonly find basking in memories of past summers and looking forward to future springs to be essential to psychological survival. I am sure our own Commissioned Lay Leader would agree with me if he lacked the means to go to the warm and sunny place he is right now.

But maybe that's just the point. Maybe we just aren't sufficiently evolved to accept and appreciate what *is*. Maybe a longing for warmth and light when it is the time for cold and darkness is a sign of psychological and spiritual pathology, or at least immaturity, a refusal to face facts, a longing for magical solutions that can never be.

I don't think so.

There is an old joke that it isn't exactly true that blondes have more fun, but since their memories are so bad everything always seems new

and fresh to them. To a person with anterograde amnesia, a person who actually experiences the world that way, because of benzodiazepenes, or a stroke or external trauma damaging the hippocampal area of the brain, that would seem a pretty sour joke - if he or she were capable of remembering the beginning of the joke by the time you reached the punch line. Those are the people who have been compelled by circumstances to live entirely in those three seconds of the present that Professor Pinker talks about, who as the ships of their personalities glide through the water of time are utterly blind to the wakes behind them as well as to the headings in front of them. They are totally dependent on others for their survival, seem frustrated rather than happy, and if they are indeed our spiritual superiors they have no way of communicating their insights to us.

At this point some of you may object that I am making a straw man here. None of the advocates of 'living in the moment' claim that we should spend *all* our time there. They would simply free us from the overattention to the real or imagined past and the wholly imagined future that keep us perpetually resentful and dissatisfied.

Certainly, one can look to the past or future too much, or in the wrong way. The French diplomat Talleyrand once said of the Hapsburgs, perhaps the most powerful royal dynasty in Europe for several hundred years, that "They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing". The same can be said for many of the Balkan peoples, or the religious forces now battling over the so-called Holy Land - which to my mind has been so defiled by the blood and tears and voidings of millions of dying and bereaved souls that whatever holiness it once possessed has been irredeemably tainted.

And as Joe Hill put it, millions of Americans have been bullied and gulled by the promise that "You'll get pie in the sky when you die" and the threat that

If you fight hard for children and wife
Try to get something good in this life
You're a sinner and bad man, they tell,
When you die you will sure go to hell.

Similarly, so-called Muslim holy men, drunk with the power that comes to them from their exclusive knowledge of the obscure and ancient dialect of Arabic in which the Quran is written, claim that the correctly interpreted teachings of the Seal of the Prophets have nothing to do with kindness or tolerance or the creation of a just and peaceful and prosperous society in the here and now, but with detonating explosives wrapped around one's waist in the middle of crowds of innocent people, or piloting jetliners into skyscrapers, so that one can

enter paradise and finally have access to the female companionship that those 'holy men' and the tyrants whose rule they support are monopolizing in this world.

So yes, it is true that the use of grievances from the past to fuel acts of violence intended to realize the vision of a paradisaical future can represent an escape from a bleak and spoiled present.

But it is also true that 'living one day at a time', as the saying goes, can represent an escape from a bitter past and an unpromising future. For example, consider two more of the lines from "Help Me Make It Through The Night":

I don't care what's right or wrong, I don't try to understand.
Let the devil take tomorrow. Lord, tonight I need a friend.

Does that sound like someone who is contented and would make a good spiritual guide?

My quarrel, then, is not with the notion that there is danger in living too much of our lives with our minds in the past or in the future, that we need to be more aware of where we are right now. It is with the notion that, when someone is instructing us in how to be more mindful of the now, there is no need for that person to warn us that there is also danger in living with our minds too much in the present. This is especially a problem right now, when, as Bob Bledsoe reminds us in his summary of next week's sermon, "Things are getting worse all the time, it seems, and there's nothing we can do about it and the people who seem able to don't seem inclined to make improvements." Now is so not the time to cocoon ourselves in time and space as much as possible, our only sign of life the occasional flicker of hope that some expert in Madison or Washington will, contrary to all our experience of what experts in Madison and Washington actually do, kiss all our foreign policy and economic and social boo-boos and make them better.

In 1921, a recent Polish immigrant to the United States named Alfred Korzybski published a book called *Manhood of Humanity*, in which he made a new kind of distinction between human beings and other living organisms, based not on traits but on behavior - specifically, the behavior he called binding.

All life forms, he pointed out, bind energy, by acquiring and burning that which fuels their life processes. Almost all animals, and some plants, bind space: their ability to move through space enables them to establish territories to sequester for themselves the resources needed for survival and reproduction. Only humans bind time, or at least do so on a major scale: through language and other cultural

behaviors, we can build on the efforts of past generations by attaching their information stores to ours, and in turn future generations can attach to our own, hopefully augmented ones.

Now, there are too many philosophers claiming that there is no way to proceed from an 'is' to an 'ought' for me to care to touch that particular third rail. So I am not going to try to argue that the fact that humans and humans alone *can* engage in time-binding, *can* integrate past, present, and future, implies that they *ought* to, that there is ethical merit in doing so. But happiness, contentment, freedom from stress - those are to an increasing degree measurable facts, and I believe they can be linked to time-binding activity.

A long time ago, I heard a dictum that I remember as 'a faculty cries for use'. I thought I was told that Aristotle said it, but I have not been able to find it on the Internet at least, attributed to him or anyone else. If Aristotle did say it, it was almost certainly an ethical principle; as an unenlightened dead white male, he cheerfully derived oughts from ises all over the place. But it can also be used to describe a requirement for psychological satisfaction, as our cats constantly remind me when they plead with me to wave something around or throw something so that they can practice their pouncing and skewering skills; as predators that appear so perfectly engineered that they tempt to to believe in intelligent design - at least until I recall the two herniated disks in my lower back - they appear to have some kind of compulsion to keep in practice just in case the goofy-looking, inept hunters who share their living quarters fail to place those strange but edible lumps of stuff in bowls on the floor.

We humans can also derive pleasure from mastering physical skills, from learning to perform some task as Valentine Michael Smith did in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* learned to drive a tractor: "brightly, brightly, and with beauty". This is true even when those skills are, so to speak, space-binding skills, with no bearing on what makes us uniquely human. In short, there seems to be something to Abraham Maslow's principle that "what you can be, you must be" - not in an ethical sense, again, but to avoid a sense of self-betrayal and achieve a sense of satisfaction and self-respect.

This suggests that since we *can* be time-binders, in a psychological sense we *must* be time-binders.

At this point, let us note that in order for time-binding to take place at an intergenerational level, it must first take place at the personal level. Each of us must perform the integration of past, present, and future that we call learning in order for us to have anything to pass on to future generations.

Let us say you are playing tennis, and the ball is coming toward you. You need a minimum of three observations, taken at different points in time, to make a successful interception of that ball with your racket. The first establishes the initial position of the ball. The second establishes the velocity of the ball, that is to say its speed and direction. The third establishes its acceleration, which is the rate of change in its velocity.

You can improve your odds with a fourth observation, which gives you jerk, the rate of change of acceleration. In practice, of course, if you really want to place your racket in front of the ball, you can't be aware of taking those observations; they take place at the unconscious level. But take them you do. And as you take each one, the present slides into the past, until the future - the interception of the ball by the racket - becomes the present. And if you succeed in intercepting it, it shows that you have successfully bound together past, present, and future: you have successfully computed a trajectory. And you have the satisfaction of hearing the 'thunk' of the ball against the racket as it rebounds toward your adversary.

Now let us say you are living your life, and the observations you are making bind not successive positions of a ball but successive states of yourself. If you successfully compute that trajectory, perform that integration, we say you are leading a life of integrity.

Those who successfully compute the trajectory of a group, whether a congregation, a nation, or the whole of humanity, are what we call leaders.

And those who successfully compute the trajectory of a group across generations are called poets or sages or prophets.

Among the great events of the past that have marked the trajectory of our nation were the abolition of slavery and the abolition of Jim Crow. One of our greatest prophets, while contributing so much to the second of these, expressed the dream of an America where people would "not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character". Our last presidential election will, I believe, be seen in the future as a third great event, one in which Dr. King's dream was to a great extent realized. Even those who voted for Barack Obama because and only because he was not John McCain would likely, a generation ago, have taken one look at his complexion and simply stayed home.

Our new President has a lot on his agenda, but I hope he will devote at least some attention to keeping us on that same trajectory. Because there are still plenty of people whom we judge by other irrelevant

criteria rather than by the content of their character, people we won't even talk to because they 'aren't our sort, dear'.

And so we must revisit the past. First, to remember our motto of 'e pluribus unum' and remind ourselves that even these are among the 'many' that constitute the 'one' American people. Second, to search the history of attempts at inclusion to find out what works and what pitfalls to avoid. And last, to add to our counselors our poets and sages and prophets of the past through an adherence to tradition, what Chesterton called "the democracy of the dead".

And when we have done that, we must make dreams for the future. We must devise strategies for talking to the deaf, for listening to the mute, for seeing the invisible, and plans to implement those strategies.

And there is but one time when that revisiting and dreaming can take place, and that is the present.