

Don't Shortcut the Moment

“Plan ahead.” “Prepare for tomorrow.” “Create a vision of your future.” Slogans like these are common in our culture. They reflect a proactive and achievement-oriented mindset, and are basic guidelines for highly successful people. While the benefit of these slogans cannot be denied, I'd like to argue for another perspective: “Live *in* the moment.” Today is all we've got. Yesterday is history, and tomorrow never comes.

Cherish the Present

In his new book, *The Present*, Spencer Johnson (author of *Who Moved My Cheese?*) advises us to learn from the past and plan for the future, but live in the present. Similarly, Paul Pearsall's popular audiotape program, *The Pleasure Principle*, teaches the joy of living *in* the moment (not *for* the moment). The key point is that pleasure comes from experiencing the present – the situation we are in right now. Simply put, this means focusing on where we are and what we are doing, and thinking now.

To truly cherish the present, we need to use all of our relevant senses. When eating, for example, we should use more than our taste buds to savor the distinctive features of a meal. We live more in the moment when we appreciate the texture of the food, its aroma and the visual display. And of course the context of the eating environment should be treasured, perhaps with a focus on picturesque scenery and playful chatter with one or more companions. With undivided attention to the many pleasures of a simple dinner, you can get caught

up in the moment and, maybe even consume fewer calories – a beneficial side-effect for some people.

Have you ever seen people shovel popcorn as shown in movies? With kernels flying everywhere and mouths stuffed to the hilt, the focus seems to be on the outcome of getting filled up, instead of enjoying each tasty piece of popcorn. Actually, it's not farfetched to consider such rapid eating to be at-risk behavior. Have you ever choked on a piece of popcorn or another food particle because of eating too fast?

Advising us to be sensuous about the simple everyday pleasures, Dr. Pearsall reminds us to "Take time to feel the warmth of your bed, linger in your morning shower, savor the taste of your breakfast orange juice, reflect a few minutes on the setting sun, listen for the evening birds' songs, and hold someone close at the end of your day."

Consider that depressed individuals typically dwell on the disappointments of their past. "If only I had done that differently, or made another choice," they ruminate to themselves. In contrast, many anxiety-ridden people live in pessimistic anticipation of the future. Their self-talk is something like, "What if I can't pull this off?" "What if my support system crumbles?" "What if Murphy's Law prevails, as usual, and I fail miserably? My future will be ruined."

Depressed and overly-anxious people are obsessed with the past or the future, respectively. They miss the very pleasures of the moment that could help them relax and rejuvenate. The melancholy of the past and the insecurities of

the future can actually be cast aside by the rapture of the present, if only our hectic lives would permit us to let that happen.

Bottom line: Whatever your situation, be there. You can never be there again, not under the exact same circumstances. Later it will be only a memory, now it's enjoyment to experience.

Relevance to Safety

So what's "living in the moment" got to do with occupational safety and health? I suspect you already know the answer. When we attend to our ongoing behavior in every respect, we are unlikely to experience personal injury. Living in the moment means we are using all relevant senses to recognize what we are doing and where we are doing it. Hence, we fully encounter the present, and make a mishap unlikely.

An Illustrative Case Study

The connection between personal safety and living in the moment is painfully obvious to me. I say "painfully" because the many injuries I've sustained over the years have been caused in part by me being inattentive to the present. Yes, I am definitely "injury prone". From childhood through adulthood, I've had my share of serious injuries – many more than average. Why?

I'm convinced my continual, future-oriented mindset is a primary cause of my injuries. Just the other day, for instance, I tripped over my own feet while walking on campus and nearly fell flat on my face. "You were not watching where you were going," said the friend walking next to me. I had to admit she was right. I was not attending to the present, but was contemplating my

destination and upcoming activities. I was thinking of my next step, rather than focusing on the ongoing behavior – my current step.

I defended my “near miss” by telling my friend a story I heard about Albert Einstein when he was teaching physics at Princeton University. After stopping and talking to a university colleague, Professor Einstein asked his friend which direction he had come from before stopping to talk. After his colleague pointed and said, “From over there,” Dr. Einstein replied, “Good, that means I’ve eaten lunch.”

Of course it was a joke to link my problem with the genius of Albert Einstein. However, both stories do reflect neglect of the present and as a result, potential for personal injury. Moreover, the actor in each story missed out on some pleasures of the moment.

In Conclusion

So what’s your story? How often do you shortcut the moment and thereby miss present pleasures and put yourself at-risk for personal injury? Sometimes the situation and other people set the stage for thinking about your destination rather than experiencing the pleasure of the process. I’m reminded of this every time I observe the hustle and bustle at an airport terminal. In this case, we need to fight the status quo, take a deep breath, reflect on the pleasure principle, and experience where we are. Too often this is easier said than done.

One final personal note. The rock-and-roll band I joined last year accepted my choice for a new name – “Magic Moments”. At the time, I thought that name particularly appropriate because most of our music is classic southeast beach,

typified by the Drifters' 1959 classic – “This Magic Moment”. Now I have another, perhaps more important, reason to appreciate this label. By paying attention to the magic moments of our lives, we realize the simple and irreplaceable joy of our everyday existence. And in the process, we reduce the probability of personal injury. After all, the past is gone (learn from it), the future may or may not be (set goals and anticipate), but the current moment is always a gift...a “present” to enjoy. So, live in the present and have a safe day!

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help people develop, refine, and implement interventions that prevent workplace injuries. SPS is offering a series of seminars throughout 2004. For more information about these seminars, related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233. Also log on to www.spcoach.com to learn about an innovative internet approach to teaching these and other principles and procedures for improving the human dynamics of your workplace.