

B.W. Richardson

Preserve the Embers; Stoke the Fire

Essays on consciousness and liberty

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Preserve the Embers; Stoke the Fire

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What It Is

The essays in this eBook originally appeared at “Montag ... and the clocks were striking thirteen,” the blog of B.W. Richardson, from July 20 through August 2, 2009.

For more stuff like this, visit bwrmontag.blogspot.com or bwrichardson.com.

Who It Is

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Preserve the Embers; Stoke the Fire

The beginning of the wage-slave week often brings a fresh fire and a sense of resolve. The past two days have been filled with quiet moments, away-from-the-quotidian moments, active moments, refreshment of personal goals, and thoughts of reinvention and renewal. Then one enters the quotidian pace, and the clock must be tended. (“Or must it?” your soul cries from its rapidly diminishing quiet place.)

The trick, often not accomplished, is to maintain a hold on that fresh resolve. Too often it’s abandoned by noon Monday. There are deadlines to make, papers to push, soil to be turned, clock hands to turn. During the course of the day, the resolution becomes a quaint memory; what began as a confident shout of joy becomes a faint, desperate whisper. Morning triumph leads to evening defeat. No wonder so many medicate themselves to sleep.

Essential to success in living, then, must be finding that Monday morning optimism and drive on Tuesday morning. I find mild success by posting little reminders on the face of my computer, brief sayings from two of my favorite outlaws.

One is a resolution I have written about before, from Mohandas Gandhi: “Let the first act of every morning be to make the following resolve for the day: I shall not fear anyone on Earth. I shall fear only God. I shall not bear ill will toward anyone. I shall not submit to injustice from anyone. I shall conquer untruth by truth. And in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering.”

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The other is from an outlaw I haven't quoted often because I don't claim or desire to be an evangelist and don't want to be confused with one; however, it's foolish for me to pretend I am not influenced by these words, so take them simply as an explanation of my motivations: "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Renewal is an everyday task. Stoking the fire requires a constant vigil. Life is an endless struggle against forces that will beat you down, but only if you let them. Your greatest power is control over your own personal actions and reactions.

These two writers spent their share of time in prison cells for holding beliefs that transcended the politics of the day, and for putting those beliefs into action. Perhaps the memory of those cells helped them maintain that Monday-morning confidence; no doubt it also left them sometimes in despair. But they maintained long enough to make a difference for the ages.

Preserve the embers of resolutions you made when you had a clear vision of your dreams. Some nights the embers are all that's left, but they contain the seeds of an ongoing fire.

July 20, 2009

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Tend to this moment; it's all we have

Sitting by a window at this house in a small woods on a cool summer morning, naturally the main sound outside is the call of a bird — several birds, of course. Sinking into the moment, one is suddenly struck by the realization that the moment is all there is.

There is no time. Yesterday is a collection of moments like this. They cannot be retrieved; what's done is done. Tomorrow will be another such collection; it cannot be accessed, not yet, not ever.

A joke I heard from Barry McGuire, who tonight (according to his Web page) plans to be across the country in Port Townsend, Washington, home of Liberty magazine and a town I would like to see someday:

Guy walks into a bar (as so many guys do in jokes) and sees a sign: “Free beer, noon tomorrow.” All right, sez he, I’m coming back to this little gin joint.

The next day right before noon, he walks in, plants his hands on the counter and says, “Line ’em up. I’m ready for the free beer.” Bartender looks at him as if he’s nuts. “What are you talkin’ about? There’s no free beer today.” To emphasis their arguments, they both point at the sign: “Free beer, noon tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow doesn’t exist. Only this moment is real.

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What does this moment require? Consider the needs of the moment, and act.

When Barry talked about this, it reminded me of the cover of a book, years ago when I lived in the 1960s (oddly, I now see it was published in 1971): *Be Here Now*. It has always sounded like as good a good philosophy of life as can be summarized in three words. He talked about encountering the idea in *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, written 350 years ago by a priest named Jean-Pierre de Caussade. I ran out and found the priest's book; it is slow going, but it is amazing if a person is so inclined.

Here's the gist of it: Only this moment is real. You have control only over your actions of this moment. What do you need to do? Do it. Do you have a task that appears too much for you? Do you think you can handle it just for this moment?

Barry spoke in the context of a man who was trying to stay sober. He asked the man, Do you think you can keep from drinking just for this moment? "Sure, that's not so hard." OK, How about this moment, now? "Yeah, I can do that." And now this moment, can you keep from drinking for this moment? Great. You're doing it.

Each day is a collection of moments. Stay in the moment at hand, do what the moment requires. Don't fret over past moments; you cannot change what happened then. Don't fret over tomorrow; tomorrow doesn't exist yet — and if you tend to the moment, the needs of future moments will become self-evident. Stay in the present moment.

July 21, 2009

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Action and reaction

This week is the anniversary of perhaps the most horrific moment of my professional career. I was working for a small family operation that fought for years against a competing firm owned by a huge corporation. The owner of my company passed along to us his deep distrust and perhaps even hatred of our big competitor. I believe I was a good soldier in his little army; in many ways I still consider that huge corporation a blight.

This week a few years ago, the owner drew us all together to tell us he had given it all he had and it was time to sell the company — to the huge corporation.

What they say about fight-or-flight is true. It did feel like the room was spinning. I was torn between fleeing the room in anger and disillusionment or staying to defend the remnants of the family company that was my home-away-from-home until, it turns out, a few hours earlier when the sale was finalized.

As I stood along the wall, I glanced down at a woman who was taking notes: At the top of her pad were the words, “In 100 years, none of this will matter.”

The words settled me down dramatically. I didn't exactly laugh, although the moment suddenly felt more humorous, but I did grasp that although I had no control over the action that had just been announced, my reaction was entirely under my control. The situation still seemed untenable, but calm reason started to flow back into a corner of my heart.

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Courage to change the things I can; the serenity to accept the things I can't; the wisdom to know the difference. At least I had the serenity down. Mustering the courage is always the dicey part of that equation.

Looking back over developments since then, I have mixed feelings. I could have and perhaps should have mustered the courage to turn over a few money-changing tables in the temple. If I had indeed fled, I would have worked through the consequences of that action by now. But again, those moments are past and today presents its own challenges.

From the news of the world to our own backyard, we will be presented today with actions that no doubt will challenge our core — on the grand scale, tyranny is afoot in the world and nation; on the smallest of scales, no matter how we plan to spend the day, something unexpected will divert us from that course. For the most part you can't control those actions, only your reactions.

A practical example: My coffeemaker malfunctioned and the day began with brown liquid all over the kitchen counter instead of in the pot where it belonged. As I sopped coffee off the floor, I found the seeds of this little essay. Now, let me see if I can find a way to tackle that tyranny ...

July 22, 2009

Gojira and the cuddly monster factor

From time to time I wonder about the process that converted Godzilla into a series of movies that appeal mostly to children.

The 1954 Japanese film *Gojira* is a remarkable drama. Nine years after the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a creature emerges from the depths of the seas, shaken loose by the vibrations of nuclear bomb testing and mutated to unnatural proportions by the bombs' radiation.

A scientist has created a weapon even more terrible than an atomic bomb, one so horrible that he refuses to share the process he used to discover the technology and resists efforts to use the weapon against the giant creature, even as Japan's largest city comes under siege.

It's a movie about war, peace, violence and nonviolence, technology and the simple ongoing question: Just because something can be done, is it right and just to do it? A very thoughtful and important movie with fantasy and science fiction elements.

Gojira was repackaged as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, for distribution in America, and each and every one of its more than 20 sequels has been mindless child's play. One almost has to wonder: What was so dangerous about the ideas in Gojira that it had to be so trivialized?

But then — scary monsters are often transformed into cuddly children's toys. Look at the stark and poignant story of the man built from parts of other men by Dr. Frankenstein. The iconic image of Boris Karloff in his monster makeup eventually became Herman Munster.

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Perhaps it's simply a natural reaction to looking into the depths of the soul and finding darkness. We step away, we dress up the darkness with childlike innocence, and we look the other way. A person can only spend so much in the dark before needing a little sunshine.

Conspiracy to suppress dangerous ideas didn't turn Gojira into Godzilla. We just need to be reassured that things that go bump in the night are just bumps.

July 23, 2009

Free yourself: Be a puppy

The puppy to whom I introduced you briefly a couple of months ago has three times the mass she did on that day, and all of this mass is in her legs. She is a 25-pound bundle of energy on her way to the 70-ish pounds of a typical golden retriever.

Dogs are intelligent creatures, and they can teach us some things about living with limits on freedom. Most of all, especially as pups, they live to test their limits.

She will run at breakneck speed as far as she can across the yard until Sweetie or I calls her name. This is how she learns it is that far, and no farther, before the property line is breached. A cat would not stop at that line: That is why the cats stay indoors 24/7, but we have given the dog the freedom to explore the property with us. (Gotta admire the cats' attitude, though.)

Much is made of dogs' desire to please their masters, but I detect a mischievous streak. All of the sitting and staying and coming when she's called seems to have a purpose — to win back more freedom, to expand the territory she can explore when she's not required to sit or stay or come. In the end, then, the ultimate goal is not to please me but to secure as much liberty as she can.

Of course, keeping me pleased also preserves her regular supply of that tasty and nourishing alternative to munching grass and sticks — I'm her main food source. But the default setting on her soul is freedom — just as it

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is with humans and every other creature.

Some consider the goal is to “break her spirit.” Oh, no. What joy does a being possess or offer whose free spirit has been broken down and suppressed? Better that we reach an agreement where we respect each other’s property (“Don’t chew that, girl!”) and follow our own needs and desires, cooperating when they intersect.

So while I am teaching her to sit and stay and come, she is teaching me something about living as free as possible in an unfree environment: Be a puppy. I pant with giddiness.

July 24, 2009

Flowers for B.W.

After admiring Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* since my sixties teenage years, it finally struck me the other day why this story of a mentally challenged fella who becomes a genius and then falls back again is so compelling. (By the way, Keyes apparently posted Charlie Gordon's story in blog form — very cool!)

It's so simple that it took around 40 years for me to figure it out. We're all Charlie Gordon, except for the part where our brains are boosted in a scientific experiment.

We all begin with a childlike innocence and feel our way towards knowledge. We all fall in love with the teacher and gain knowledge and confidence and wisdom (hopefully) along the way.

And, of course, we all lose bits and pieces of our abilities as time inexorably takes its toll on our finite minds and bodies. In the end we are mentally challenged and childlike again.

So no wonder we (OK, I can't speak for you) — so no wonder I choked up and tears flowed as Charlie's mind slips away. Even as an all-powerful teen, something somewhere inside me sensed this was Every Man's Fate.

Great story. Fine movie, great performance by Cliff Robertson. And most of all ... Uhh — where was I going with this again?

July 26, 2009

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The power of the to-do list

Not long ago I put myself on a daily schedule, more or less. Frustrated by the frequency with which I allowed myself to divert from the routine (“Holy cow, I forgot to clean the kitty litter” and even “Doh! I was going to make myself breakfast”), I made myself a checklist of the things I want or need to get done every day.

I also availed myself of the calendar that came with my computer, mapping out my day in increments of time. I print out these two lists and keep them on a clipboard with me at all times.

Job one is to stay in the moment and keep focused on what the needs of Now are, and so I don’t begin to panic when something distracts me from the task I set for, say, 8:30. But because that 8:30 task is on the list, I have a reminder in front of me to ensure my distracted mind is brought back to that particular thing to do. Except for those times when I’m scheduled to meet with someone else, the numbers are simply numbers anyway. As I write this and the clock says 6:09, 8:30 does not exist. The times I attach to the tasks are not as important as the reminder of the tasks themselves.

Yep, it’s nothing but a daily to-do list, but checking off a list does add to a positive attitude. Making the list, and conquering it on a daily basis, puts me in control of the quotidian, not the opposite.

Modern conveniences, especially our powerful computers, do a marvelous job of fissioning our attention span. The ability to multitask is considered an

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admirable trait; indeed, we even invented that word, multitask. Sinking one's full attention into a single task, devoting all of the mind and soul and heart to one thing even for a little while, seems to be a lost art.

Keeping a list of the day's required tasks helps to screen out the unnecessary and bring the mind back to the important — especially when the important is not always the urgent. I have written down reading, prayer and meditation at the start of the day simply because my awakening mind cannot always remember exactly how I wanted to start every day, even when I have been doing it daily for some period of time. There are tasks that ought to be tended daily at the office, but I left them untended in favor of tasks that had to be done — and the less urgent but still important tasks piled up until they became urgent.

The list is a tool, a guide to focus my mind. Each check is a little success, a little mission accomplished, a little bit of the quotidian conquered. I am not a slave to the list, but neither am I free to ignore it. The mind needs a clear vision to keep moving forward, onward and upward, and the day so assails the senses that it's easy to get off the path. The list is a little roadmap made when the vision was foremost in my mind, and regular consultation with those two pieces of paper keeps the vision clear.

And I prefer the paper list to having it in electronic form. When I'm reviewing the list, it won't beep and remind me of something else that needs tending. Sometimes you need to pay attention. In fact, let me revise that thought: At all times, you need to pay attention. For me, for now, the list keeps me in the Now. You may find a tool that works better for you — but my humble advice is to find that tool.

July 27, 2009

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Dream: You cannot fail

“Self-help” is an entire category of book; an industry has grown around materials that give people advice about how to live a more successful life. I think the reason more people don’t find success is that they spend more time studying the principles than putting the principles into action.

One question I find frequently in such materials is: What would you do today, right here and right now, if you knew you could not fail? A corollary of the question: What would you do today, right here and right now, if money was no object?

The point of posing these questions is to remove obstacles to your thinking process. Too often creativity is held back by fear of failure or by the perception that a great deal of money is required to launch whatever endeavor you may be considering.

Therefore it’s a liberating and exciting exercise to set your mind free by imagining you can’t fail and/or that you can afford everything you need to succeed. But one more step is necessary to pop your dream over the top and into reality.

Imagine this: You’re not imagining things.

You *cannot* fail. Money *is* no object.

I need you to ponder that carefully, I need that to sink in, so I’m going to repeat it.

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You cannot fail. Money is no object.

When you set your mind on a vision that fires up your dreams, it's as if the forces of the universe align to make it happen. Try not to think too hard about why that's true, but understand it is true. Maybe it's simply that people sense your enthusiasm and are drawn to help. Maybe it's that catching the fire of your inner passion generates an energy that makes you do what's necessary. Maybe it's God; yep, that's how I envision it, but if you have issues with the idea of supernatural power, don't dwell on it. The important thing is overcoming the illusion that you might fail.

Just know that dreams are contagious. When you set your mind on a vision that fires up your dreams, something makes it begin to happen. Understanding that you cannot fail ignites the dreams.

Most people — if they even bother to go through the exercise and answer a question like “What would you do if you knew you could not fail?” — feel a burst of creative energy, get in touch with their dreams and inner passion, and then step back and think, “Well, that was an interesting exercise. Too bad for all the reasons why I can't do that stuff.”

The people who succeed find a way to stay in touch with that inner passion. They discover that it wasn't just a mental exercise.

What would you do today, right now and right here, if you knew you could not fail? Hang onto that thought, because here comes the kicker: It's true. You cannot fail. So you may as well get started.

July 28, 2009

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B.W.'s Book Report:

They Thought They Were Free

Milton Mayer's book subtitled "The Germans 1933-45" is a remarkable bit of work. Mayer lived in Germany for a few years after the close of World War II and wanted to know how ordinary folks could have allowed the oppressive regime led by Adolf Hitler to seize control of their country and their lives.

The title of the book answers the question: They thought they were free.

Mayer writes about his friendship with 10 men and his conversations about their everyday lives in a relatively small town. He paints a plausible portrait of people only tangentially aware that their government was descending into totalitarianism and tyranny — because they were busy living their lives and it usually didn't affect them directly.

He is at his best when he compares the slow, insidious progress of the Nazi regime with everyday events of the early 1950s in the United States, when he wrote the book — always with the caveat that "not that we're as bad as Germany was getting in the 1930s, of course." For example, introducing the question of how millions of Jews could be spirited away without most people understanding what was happening:

When people you don't know, people in whom you have no interest, people whose affairs you have never discussed, move away from your community, you don't notice that they are going or that they are gone. When, in addition, public opinion (and the government itself) has depreciated them, it is still likelier that you won't notice their departure or, if you do, that you will forget about

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it. How many of us whites, in a white neighborhood, are interested in the destination of a Negro neighbor whom we know only by sight and who has moved away?

After a spellbinding couple of hundred pages in which Mayer outlines precisely how it may have happened — and writing around the edges of the similarities to, say, McCarthyism — he then spends the last portions of the book theorizing about how something in the German character made that country more susceptible than other cultures to the emergence of a Hitler. The writer is less convincing at that stage of the book.

But it's interesting to hear the Kronenbergers' descriptions and explanations of what life was like in the 1930s and early '40s, and to imagine how a free people could be drained of their freedoms without losing the sense that they were still free.

Standing in line to have their persons and property searched before they can proceed, answering questions they are forbidden by law to refuse to answer, applying for permits that will allow them to build on their own land, and standing in the rain smoking a cigarette, Americans can be heard to proclaim their country is the symbol of freedom around the world.

Someday, perhaps, a Milton Mayer will befriend 10 of us and write a book about everyday life in these times.

July 29, 2009

But you are free after all

There are a few ways to react when you read suggestions like “The Dark Years Are Here” (Egon von Greyerz – Matterhorn Asset Management, July 14, 2009), which predicts: “Starting in the next 6 months and culminating in 2011-12 the world will experience a series of tumultuous events which will be life changing for most people in the world. But 2011-12 will not be the beginning of an upturn in the world economy but instead the start of a long period of economic, political and social upheaval that could last for a couple of decades.”

And it would be easy to fall into dismay when you find a historical review (“Not in Liberty Born,” Jerome L. Wright, strikeroot.com, July 30, 2009) that says, essentially, that if the words of the Declaration of Independence light a fire in your heart, the flame was extinguished when the Articles of Confederation were abandoned in 1789: “The assertion that Americans gained their freedom through the War for Independence (War for Sovereignty) is a myth, one that is highly useful to the federal State. The assertion that Americans have remained free is one of the bigger frauds in history.”

The main things to avoid are discouragement and fear. As George Herbert eloquently put it when he wrote his Dune books, “Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.” And if we are indeed at the beginning of a long period of upheaval, if we have indeed bought into an illusion of freedom, the first thing we need is our wits about us.

Herbert’s Bene Gesserit chanted a litany against fear, of which the quote above is part:

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I must not fear.
Fear is the mind-killer.
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear.
I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path.
Where the fear has gone, there will be nothing.
Only I will remain.

It's a sound process for cleansing the mind of fear's effects. Of course the future is scary; the unknown always is. But get your mind clear in this moment, and ideas about how to prepare will present themselves.

The rulers of this country have not been especially interested in maintaining citizens' political freedom — certainly not in recent years, by some accounts not for a couple of centuries and by this account not ever. And yet hearts and souls continue to jump at the idea of freedom, and millions of people have come to these shores over the years in pursuit of the relative political freedom afforded here.

I use the qualifier “political” freedom above, because the Declaration was correct: We each were born free. Free will and expression are the default settings of the human soul. Governments may be formed with an idealistic goal to “secure” those freedoms, but what governments do best is inhibit and crush free spirits.

But no government can change your mind. No government can make you afraid without your permission. Yes, a government has few qualms about interfering with your life, your liberty and your peaceful pursuit of happiness.

But you are free.

July 30, 2009

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Letters to the Citizens of the United States

The Jerome L. Wright essay to which I linked yesterday sent me scurrying first to my search engine and then to my library and a work I didn't realize I already possessed: Thomas Paine's *Letters to the Citizens of the United States and Particularly to the Leaders of the Federal Faction*. These are on pages 908-957 of *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine, Volume 2*, which I obtained through the wonderful online archive of the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

This morning I read carefully and joyously through the first two letters, the joy a result of the encounter with an unapologetically free mind. Paine wrote to remind the citizens of the new United States of the principles behind their revolution 26 years earlier, and to call out the faction that he saw as turning back those principles in the name of "federalism."

One of Paine's observations gave me a small modicum of hope:

There is in America, more than in any other country, a large body of people who attend quietly to their farms, or follow their several occupations; who pay no regard to the clamours of anonymous scribblers, who think for themselves, and judge of government, not by the fury of newspaper writers, but by the prudent frugality of its measures, and the encouragement it gives to the improvement and prosperity of the country; and who, acting on their own judgment, never come forward in an election but on some important occasion.

When this body moves, all the little barkings of scribbling and witless curs pass for nothing.

Do these people still exist, and are they "a large body"? It's difficult to say, given the results of the last several elections — indeed, given the results of

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most elections — although much may be concluded by examining how many people don't participate in most elections.

Our days are filled with “little barkings of scribblings and witless curs” who advocate chains for all but their anointed rulers — scribblings, and their electronic equivalent in this modern age. Do those who think for themselves still exist in sufficient numbers to make a difference?

And by “make a difference,” I mean nothing more than to make the witless curs and anointed ones irrelevant. Freedom means the ability to say, as the great fictional Independent Malcolm Reynolds once said, “I got no need to beat you; I just want to go my way.” Reynolds was a great example of Paine's people “who attend quietly to their farms, or to their several occupations.”

Two hundred and seven years have passed since Paine wrote his letters, and the barkings have continued unceasingly. The embers of the flame he started with Common Sense still glow, often just barely.

The halls of government are filled with men and women anxious to extinguish those embers. They have grown fat and sassy on the backs of those willing to allow them to hold the reins of power; a little more Thomas Paine in our intellectual diets may be the cure.

July 31, 2009

Delighting in serenity

Another gem from Letter III of Tom Paine's *Letters to the Citizens of the United States*, in which the great freedom advocate sounded the alarm about those who wanted to convert the US of A into an Old World monarchy/dictatorship in 1802-03 (and later, some might say, succeeded beyond their wildest dreams):

There is a general and striking difference between the genuine effects of truth itself, and the effects of falsehood believed to be truth. Truth is naturally benign; but falsehood believed to be truth is always furious. The former delights in serenity, is mild and persuasive, and seeks not the auxiliary aid of invention. The latter sticks at nothing.

It has naturally no morals. Every lie is welcome that suits its purpose. It is the innate character of the thing to act in this manner, and the criterion by which it may be known, whether in politics or religion. When any thing is attempted to be supported by lying, it is presumptive evidence that the thing so supported is a lie also. The stock on which a lie can be grafted must be of the same species as the graft.

What's especially striking about Paine's letters is that, although the specific circumstances are different, the tactics of those who would assault individual freedoms haven't changed a whit. This is another example.

It seems to me that when you've touched on the basic truth of a thing, you experience the serenity Paine mentions. Any anxiety you might feel is more like an excitement of wanting or needing to share the truth. Truth does indeed have a "mild and persuasive" nature to it.

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“Falsehood believed to be truth” is a different beast altogether. An intensity and even rage accompanies the demeanor of those who know they’re right but maintain a sliver (or even a plank or two) of doubt. In its extreme, this is the anger of “We gotta round up them illegals and ship ’em back to Mexico before they finish ruinin’ our country” or “That smoker over there in the corner is poisoning my air” and “The fight against climate change requires you to submit to the state, and how can you even doubt?”

Self-evident truth settles into the heart and takes up residence. Falsehood believed to be truth is the proverbial resounding gong or clanging cymbal. Again, it’s Malcolm Reynolds and “I got no need to beat you; I just want to go my way.”

The holder of truth knows that at some point, the truth will become self-evident even to the hardest to convince. The holder of the falsehood-believed-to-be-truth needs to convince, because maybe if he can find enough other people to believe the falsehood it really will be true. But a falsehood believed to be true by a vast majority is still false; that’s the underlying frustration and the root of the fervor.

The truth “delights in serenity.” What a wonderful phrase!

August 1, 2009

Resolving a contradiction that isn't

An old friend perusing these thoughts the other day admitted to some confusion about what appear to be some contradictions in my recent writings about consciousness.

On the one hand, I wrote about keeping your mind focused in the moment, because you certainly can't control what happened yesterday and tomorrow literally doesn't exist and never will. At any given moment there's only now.

Then a few days later I wrote about asking what you would do if you knew you could not fail, and then I added guess what, you can't fail — move on accordingly.

If we should live in the moment with no thought of a future goal, he asked, what's the point of a to-do list or dreams or goals or the other stuff I've been writing about lately?

Good question; the hiccup is in coupling “live in the moment” with “no thought of a future goal.” (P.S. I think he grokked this, as his e-mail was titled “I'm confused...not really.”) Making a conscious attempt to stay in the moment is not the same as “going willynilly all over the place,” as he colorfully put it elsewhere.

In fact, staying in the moment can be a cure for willynilly syndrome. Often the moment has several demands — a conscious, constant attention to priorities can keep the mind focused. This electronic toy full of bells and whistles, on which I'm typing these thoughts, is a great example. While I've

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been composing, it's been playing the great album John B. Sebastian, and my mind has wandered to a variety of places that could have sent me to the search engine. (Whatever happened to the young lady who shared my passion for Sebastian and accompanied me to a couple of his concerts when we both were in high school? What was the story again of how the album was released on both MGM and Reprise records? Where did I put my Woodstock album anyway?) Meanwhile, my e-mail dinged; there's a new message waiting.

But the current goal is to finish these thoughts. The needs of the moment were for me to stay on this page, typing. Staying in the moment is not incompatible with having a goal. I have started developing specific goals for where I hope to be in six months, a year, five years — but life is still what happens to you, moment by moment, while you're busy making other plans.

My friend concluded with some great advice: "... if you are consciously trying to live in the moment, it is taking your mind away from its natural course, wandering, picking up, sorting and filing other ethereal information it meets in its travels."

I agree that a little mind-wandering is necessary to maintain one's sanity. A sense of direction helps prevent the wandering from being out-of-control willynilly; a sense of the moment helps the goals from being so rigid that we miss a sudden or subtle shift in priorities.

All of this navel-gazing boils down to this, however: I am here in this place now, and I control only my actions and reactions now. And now, if you'll excuse me, I just heard a sound coming from the puppy's direction that may need my attention ...

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