

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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## **Now**

The wandering Essenes would sometimes grow despondent, sojourning in the desert. I'm told that, when they didn't know just how they were going to put one foot in front of the next, they had a kind of a mantra. The mantra wasn't G\*d; the magic word wasn't Jesus. They just kept saying, "Today."

Today, today, today.

But sometimes, even "today" is even a little bit bigger bite than we're ready to take, isn't it? Sometimes, it's just "now."

Now, now, now.

So what do we do now?

In these past few weeks, I've been astonished by acts of kindness: both huge and heroic; and so small we could miss it if we weren't paying attention. My friend Rebecca Strauss brought her Riverview Chamber Players to Mass. General Hospital to play violin and cello duets – Handel, Bach, Telemann – while patients, visitors, and staff came and went from the chapel on Ellison One, and countless others heard the beautiful music as it was broadcast into patient rooms and throughout the hospital. Our own Liz Weber brought cookies to therapy dog handlers.

We also know full well that, at the same time, there have been countless acts of inconsideration and outright cruelty.

Each of us contains the whole universe – the best and the worst. How we choose to engage the best over the worst – how we choose to be agents of hope over despair – rests entirely on where we focus our attention. The

spiritual practice of paying attention begins and ends with understanding that it all starts here and now: it begins to begin with us.

Today, today, today. Now, now, now.

The Hoopa Indians of northwestern California believe that, when you go to sleep at night, your shadow takes off – cuts loose and goes out to party. When you wake up in morning, you have to hum it home. Sister Maria José Hobday, who recorded this belief, writes, “... You are never ready for the day until you have taken time to sing the song of your ... shadow.

“Sometimes people say, ‘I must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed – I think I’ll go back and start over.’ They’ve forgotten to hum!

“Or,” she continues, “some people get up at seven, and at ten o’clock they’re still saying, ‘Don’t mind me; I’m not all here.’ They’ve forgotten to hum! So there is a land of wisdom in remembering to get yourself all here every day. This is taught to the Hoopa tribal children ... by saying, ‘Hum your song, so your heart and spirit come together.’”<sup>1</sup>

So up and out we go, we and our shadow – heart and spirit, body and soul – out into the world, and the trick is to seize the day – today! – seize the moment – now! – and pay attention. Today, now, moment by moment, practice kindness, watch for kindness, make of our lives a string of pearls of kindness.

“Be kind whenever possible,” says the Dalai Lama. “It is always possible.” “Kindness,” says his Holiness, “is my religion.”

The practice is to use whatever is in our path to wake up – now. A wisdom story from Tibet tells the story of an arrogant, proud seeker who was determined to attain enlightenment. Not a good combination. Finally – you can tell this part by heart – the seeker was directed to the top of a very high mountain where there was a cave, where there lived a very wise old woman, who would be able to instruct this seeker in the ways of enlightenment.

After enduring great hardship, the seeker made it to the cave, where there was the very wise old woman, right out of central casting, very

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<sup>1</sup> Sister Maria José Hobday in, J. Ruth Gendler, ed., *Changing Light*, p. 89

spiritual-looking, dressed, improbably, in white, smiling beatifically. The seeker prostrated at her feet and asked to be shown the way of enlightenment. “Are you sure?” asked the woman.

Here comes the big mistake: “I’m sure!” said the seeker.

And with that, the holy one turned herself into a demon, and rose up. Brandishing a huge stick, she chased the seeker down the mountain, shouting, “Now! Now! Now!” For the rest of their days, the seeker could never escape the demon yelling, “Now!”<sup>2</sup>

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I have a fantasy that we can practice paying attention, practice kindness, and wake up without being chased by a demon with a stick. American Tibetan Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, writes, “... The more you open your heart, the more you make friends with your body, speech, mind, and the world ... the more you appreciate the fact that, when you turn on the tap, water comes out. If you’ve ever lived without water, you really appreciate that. There are all kinds of miracles....

“Now,” she continues. “That’s the key. Now, now, now. [Paying attention] trains [us] to be awake and alive, fully curious.... Our life’s work is to use what we have been given to wake up.... That’s the challenge of now: What are [we] going to do with what we have...?”

“Here’s something that’s very helpful to know about *now*. The biggest obstacle to taking a bigger perspective on life is that our emotions capture and [highjack] us. The more sensitive we become to this, the more we realize that when we start getting angry or denigrating ourselves or craving things in a way that makes us feel miserable, we begin to shut down, shut out, as if we were sitting on the edge of the Grand Canyon but we had put a ... bag over our heads.”

Pema Chödrön concludes, “[We] can experiment with this. [We can look up at the night sky:] ‘Wow! It’s so big,’ and [our] mind opens. But if [we] stand there long enough, [we’ll] start to worry about something. Then we realize ... that it feels as if everything is closing down and getting very

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<sup>2</sup> Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, pp. 29-31

small. The trick about now-ness is that [we] can let go and open up again to that space[, that spaciousness. We] can do that at any moment, always.”<sup>3</sup>

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Terry Dobson was a young martial arts student, living in Japan, when he learned about the spiritual practice of paying attention ... now. I close with his story.

“The train clanked and rattled through the suburbs of Tokyo on a drowsy spring afternoon. Our car was [pretty] empty – a few [moms] with their kids in tow, some old folks going shopping.... [And then, at] one station, the doors opened, and suddenly the ... quiet was shattered by a man bellowing violent ... curses. [He] staggered into our car ... big, drunk, and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby, ... [sending] her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple.... Terrified, [they] jumped up and scrambled toward the other end of the car. The [man] aimed a kick at the retreating back of the old woman, but missed.... This so enraged [him] that he grabbed the metal pole in the center of the car and tried to wrench it out of its stanchion. I could see that one of his hands was cut and bleeding.

“The train lurched ahead, the passengers frozen with fear....

“I was young.... I’d been putting in a solid eight hours of aikido training nearly every day for ... three years. I liked to throw and grapple. I thought I was tough. Trouble was, my martial skill was untested in actual combat.... We were not allowed to fight.... ‘Aikido,’ my teacher had said again and again, is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken [their] connection with the universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated....’ [Nonetheless, I was jonesing for] an absolutely legitimate opportunity ... [to] save the innocent by destroying the guilty.

“I stood up.

“... ‘Aha!’ he roared. ‘A foreigner!’

“... I held on lightly to the commuter strap overhead.... I planned to take [him] apart, but he had to make the first move. I wanted him mad, so I ... blew him ... [a] kiss.

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<sup>3</sup> Pema Chödrön, *op cit*, pp. 30-31

“... He gathered himself for a rush at me.

“A split second before he could move, someone shouted ‘Hey!’ ... I remember the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it.

“... I wheeled to my left; the [man] spun to his right. We both stared down at a ... tiny gentleman.... He must have been well into his seventies, ... sitting there ... in his [immaculate] kimono. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the [man]....

“... ‘C’mere and talk with me,’ the old man said in an easy vernacular, beckoning to the [man].... He waved his hand lightly.

“The big man followed, as if on a string. He planted his feet belligerently in front of the old gentleman, and roared above the clacking wheels, ‘Why ... should I talk to you?’ ... [He] now had his back to me. If his elbow moved so much as a millimeter, I’d drop him in his socks.

“The old man continued to beam at [him].

“‘Whatcha been drinkin’?’ he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest.

“‘I been drinkin’ sake,’ the [man] bellowed ... ‘and it’s none of your business!’

“‘O, that’s wonderful,’ the old man said, ‘absolutely wonderful! ... I love sake, too. Every night, ... my wife [and I; she’s seventy-six, you know], we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree, and we worry about whether it will recover from those ice storms we had last winter. Our tree has done better than I expected, though....’

“As he struggled to follow the old man’s conversation, the [man’s] face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched.... ‘I love persimmons, too.’ His voice trailed off.

“‘Yes,’ said the old man, smiling. ‘And I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.’

“‘No,’ [he replied]. ‘My wife died. I ... got no wife, I ... got no home, I ... got no job. I’m so ashamed....’ Tears rolled down his cheeks; a spasm of despair rippled through his body.”

Terry Dobson writes, “I suddenly felt dirtier than he was.

“... The old man [clucked] sympathetically. ‘My, my,’ he said, ‘that is a difficult predicament, indeed. Sit down here, and tell me about it.’

Terry Dobson concludes, “... The train arrived at my stop.... I turned my head for one last look. The [man] was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man’s lap. The old man was softly stroking [his] filthy, matted hair.

“As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench.... I would have to practice ... with an entirely different spirit.... I had just seen aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was [kindness].”

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Beloved spiritual companions,

The magic word is *today*.

May we pay attention,

open our hearts,

and wake up,

Without being chased by a demon with a stick.

Hey!

May we get ourselves all here,

we and our shadow, body and soul,

and practice kindness.

Now, now, now....

Let it begin with us.