

Smelling the Roses To Take Time

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Rest Fully Present

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These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones: they are for what they are ... There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson



Two Paths to Well-Being

There is little doubt that stress is an ordinary by-product of discordance between one's internal expectations and external outcomes, and that well-being is an extraordinary by-product of fit between these expectations and outcomes.

There are two main, opposing approaches to attaining this rewarding fit: the first path is to seek outcomes that satisfy one's expectations, and the second path is to adapt one's expectations to fit with existing outcomes. As most self-improvement systems have suggested, the first path, though ordinarily chosen, produces less frequent well-being than the second path, and it often causes stress in the seeker.

The Second Path: More Well-Being at a Price

The second, or non-ordinary path produces more frequent well-being, but at a price: it challenges our ordinary presumption – in a given here-now – that “the grass is greener on the other side” in remembered or fantasized experiences, in there's and then's. It leads us away from familiar first-path rejecting of here-and-now grass as insufficiently green, as falling short of expectation. Oddly, then, well-being can sometimes feel unfamiliar, uncomfortable.



Expanding the Present Reduces the Price

How might well-being via the second path be achieved at a lesser price, and without lapsing into complacent acceptance of all outcomes? One prescription, supported by age-old philosophical systems and now by contemporary physics, is to re-adopt, as adults, the temporal perspective of children. For example, Larry Dossey advises in *Space, Time, and Medicine*:

We visualize heaven as an eternal timeless state, and our religious traditions assert that it is the child who is its natural citizen. [M]ost great religions have always prescribed methods such as prayer and meditation through which one can become as a child; for in practicing these disciplines one quickly discovers that the experience of time changes. It ceases to flow; and experientially one feels enveloped by the stillness of which all the great mystics have spoken.

Here, like a child who is at home in nonlinear time, we experience the present not as a membrane-thin portal through which a vast future rushes like a river into a vast past, but as a timeless colorful vastness, a still lake richly sufficient unto itself, much as Emerson does in the presence of his roses (“there is no time to them”). Now, the past and future can be perceived in perspective: more remote, small, flat, colorless, as Dorothy perceives Kansas from the heart of Oz. Now, in enveloping stillness, well-being can feel more familiar, comfortable.



Expanding the Present Increases Acceptance



In such an expanded now, as Gertrude Stein observes, “A rose is a rose is a rose,” inviting little comparison with past or future roses and requiring no addictive attention from us, in anticipation of future wilting. In the expanded present – when one realizes that, at the moment that things are the way they are, they could not be any other way – one expects simply what is now, at this moment. Thus, as Emerson notes, the rose becomes “perfect in every moment of its existence.”

This expanded here-now, in which expectation fits outcome like a glove, is the context for well-being. This is when we are conscious of smelling roses’ rich perfume, seeing their vivid colors, and touching their cool, velvety petals. This is when the unchangeable in life is most acceptable (and the changeable is the most changeable).

Which Comes First?

But which comes first: taking (expanding) time or smelling the roses? On one hand, we are advised to take time to smell the roses, for example by William Blake:

*To see a world in a grain of sand ~ And heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand ~ And eternity in an hour*

On the other hand, “smelling the roses to take time” is as much prescribed, for example by Emerson above, who first experiences his roses and then his own immersion in infinity.

Regrettably, operating within the first-path mindset that well-being can result only from outcomes satisfying expectations, marketers of sensory pleasures invite us to participate in the addictive illusion that expanded present well-being can be experienced only by taking time (and spending money) to go to attractive vacation spots or to ingest psychoactive substances or to engage in enviable activities, for example. Indeed, we are often persuaded that these advertised portals to well-being *are* the well-being.



Smell the Roses to Take Time – Anywhere



It is important to step out of illusion into the reality that smelling the roses – that is, magnifying the sensory ingredients of one’s context – can help us to enjoyably magnify the moment, virtually anywhere and any time. The more we resolve that it is the expanded present *per se* that enables well-being, the more we can remember to pay close sensory attention to the commonplace, as did Bernard Berenson when perched on a lowly tree stump:

It was a morning in early summer. A silver haze shimmered and trembled over the lime trees. The air was laden with their fragrance. The temperature was like a caress. I remember ... that I climbed up a tree stump and felt suddenly immersed in Itness. I did not call it by that name. I had no need for words. It and I were one.

Roses for the Terminally Ill

Stephen Levine suggests that, “Whatever prepares you for death enhances life.” More and more, I experience in my therapeutic imagery work with terminally ill patients that their immersion in sensory-rich reviews of their own “mornings in early summer” provides a pathway to expanding their present and then enhancing their well-being now, in their own evenings in late winter.

My work is founded on James Barrie’s premise that memories enable people to “have roses in December” and on Kubler-Ross’s promise that comfort is the end-benefit of accepting loss. As in Berenson’s account of simple circumstances, the re-lived experiences need not be dramatic in content; they need only be richly savored by the senses. In my recorded life-review audio programs therefore, I enhance patients’ and family members’ spoken reminiscences with abundant, meaningful sounds and music. Sensory richness is the key.





True, Sensory-Rich Reference in Therapy

I hold that the effectiveness of any form of psychotherapy in relieving stress and enhancing well-being depends largely upon the extent to which it honors accurate, sensory-rich reference to the patient's fund of inner experience. Accordingly, using the Personal Portrait Inventory, I seek to uncover the sensory elements of all patients' personally meaningful, often commonplace experiences, for utilization in their therapeutic imagery work.

Therapeutic Invitation to the Second Path

Since individuals typically orient to the most compelling stimuli in a field, it seems important for therapists to facilitate patients' inner here-now's becoming more rich and inviting to them than their outer there-then's. Omitting to do so risks that therapy becomes just an ordinary first-path pursuit of fit between expectations and outcomes, where the focus is on seeking external outcomes that satisfy patient expectations, the ordinary by-product of which is patient stress, punctuated by sporadic well-being, as when working a slot machine.



Imagery's Potential: Eternity in an Hour



Often patients seek therapy with a first-path mindset, perceiving the therapist as a gate keeper to outcomes that satisfy their expectations. How can this ordinary quest be transformed by the extraordinary sensory experience of expanded present well-being?

Fortunately, in the array of helping modalities, imagery-based therapy is specially enabled by patient expectations to furnish occasions for this experience, explicitly and implicitly. Patients count on imagery therapists to help them become for awhile – in Dossey's terms – like children, by beckoning them into non-ordinary states of consciousness, wherein the second path, the royal road to well-being – accepting one's existing outcomes – presents itself like an unrolling red carpet. What could set a better stage in a therapy hour for one to smell the roses and thereby be magnified by Blake's "eternity in an hour?"...

The World is a Rose

Neither imagery therapists nor any other healers hold a monopoly on this kind of staging however. We are for the time being reminded by Shakespeare that "all the world's a stage" and by a Persian proverb that

*The world is a rose;
smell it, and pass it on to your friends*



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