

Living the Eternal Moment

by Richard Zenith

Christians have long tried to justify all the evil that has been on the basis of the good that will be. We speak of a world to come that will right all wrongs. But how does the world to come apply to the world in which we live? If this life is only some sort of pre-game activity before the real event, then what a mockery is made of all the human tears shed and the struggles fought. Living faith does not say, "It will be all right." No, faith says, "It is all right."

Eternity entails so much more than "forever and ever." Eternity is not a big quantity of time and space; rather, it is the foundation of time. It is the timeless moment, which is of infinite profundity. Eternity is What Is, and on eternity are built our realities of space and time. Eternity is spirit, and spirit cannot be defined or controlled.

Jesus said, "*I am eternal life,*" so we who have Christ have eternal life now. To speak of eternity is to, say that this moment has an eternal depth; it is a moment full of magic and mystery. And to say that we have eternal life is to say that we have thrown ourselves into that bottomless moment. Each second we explore and discover more of its secrets and glories, though we shall never fathom the moment.

We have faith not in the "Disneyworld" that will be in the clouds some day, but in the spirit-world that now is and on which stand all other worlds. We have faith not that we shall become perfect saints, but that we already are perfect by His Spirit, which is a far greater reality than our sin. We have this faith because of Him who says, "*It is done,*" and whose name is I Am.

There are theologians, philosophers, and social scientists who expend the greater part of their lives in postulating solutions to fundamental existential questions: questions about the existence of space and time, as well as man's existence without and within that space and time. The task which these thinkers have assumed is noble and necessary to man's continual investigation and discovery of himself; however, these questions and hypothetical responses to the questions often become so abstract as to lose all relation to the whole business of living. We may write a Summa Theologica and speak in platitudes of the reasons for man's existence, the proofs of God, and the meaning of our world, and such discussion has its place. But after we have read all the books, exhausted our mental capacities, and run against the limits of our language, we are left with life in this moment which must be lived.

All we have is the moment, though we are tempted to believe that we possess a whole host of tangible and intangible objects. We own cars, houses, clothing, and food, but the life-span of material possessions carries no guarantees; we might lose everything in an instant. Our immaterial possessions -- memories, impressions, emotions, and thoughts -- are in a constant state of flux and make a weak foundation from which to order our lives. I conclude that we have nothing but the moment, not simply because our "possessions" are temporal, but because our "possessions" have no bearing on our lives *except in the moment*.

Let us suppose that I own a large two-story house in Los Angeles. When I am in Los Angeles, I can derive a great deal of pleasure from my house, because it is there at the same time that I am there. Likewise, when I go to visit my friends in Maine, I am able to appreciate and enjoy their lovely old home, but of course I cannot enjoy my own house in Los Angeles, because I am not there. I might think about my house and say to myself, "*My house in L.A. is much superior to this old dump in Maine. Why, this place doesn't even have a swimming pool.*" Though I believe that my house is a better house, I cannot say

that I am enjoying my house in Los Angeles. That house is far removed from my present circumstance, and though I may feel some slight satisfaction by telling myself that my house is preferable to the house of my friends, such reflections only serve to deprive me of fully participating in and enjoying my present situation. When we stay with the present moment in thought and action, we acquire a healthy detachment from our possessions not at hand (my house in Los Angeles). At the same time, there is a sense in which we possess the entire world. Whatever exists in my here and now (my friends' house in Maine) is mine to enjoy to the full, whether or not I possess the title deed.

Memories are analogous. I may think that the steak dinner I ate *last* week was much tastier than the steak dinner I am eating tonight. If I dislike the person who cooked tonight's steak dinner, I may even take perverse delight in judging the meal inferior to last week's. But I certainly cannot enjoy a steak dinner that has already been digested and eliminated from my system. Memories are distant from the present moment. When we dwell overlong on memories, we succeed in quenching the life that is now. "All men are created equal" is a true statement, not because we all have equivalent physical and mental capabilities, but because after we distil our existence in the fire of trenchant analysis, we all have exactly the same remainder: the moment. When a businessman and a beggar join together for a beer at Joe's Bar, they share (to some degree, at least) a moment with each other, and the businessman's money is irrelevant to that moment.

If we have nothing but the moment, then we had better take a hard look at it and what we are going to do with it. I said that eternity exists in the timeless moment and that such a moment has infinite depth. By these words I am trying to loosen our perception from the grip of the time/space framework engendered by our language and culture.

We tend to perceive our world with two mental measuring rulers. One ruler gages time and the other ruler gages space. Such a mental process is very logical, considering that a clock and a yardstick do the same. Nevertheless, this tendency to count and measure has resulted in a narrow view of our world. We begin unconsciously to quantify our emotions, our ideas and other areas of our experience which do not conveniently fit into "time" or "space".

When we say "*I love you very much,*" we have consciously or unconsciously set a limit on our love. We always strive to make more and to make it better. Once we have dealt with the superficial sense-datum of the moment, we assume that that is all there is, and we wait impatiently for the next moment to arrive. We are in a hurry to move on, grow up, get a job, retire, die and go to heaven. We become quickly bored by today, and we hope that tomorrow will be more interesting. But we have not even looked at today! Our mental rulers found nothing to measure, so we decided there was not anything there.

But let us take a second look. Our objective world contains millions of avenues awaiting exploration, and our subjective world offers us an even wider spectrum of unexplored pathways, even though most of us content ourselves with the narrow visual field of things that are immediately apparent. The moment is eternity, because each moment has inexhaustible potential. Our three-dimensional world presents infinite phenomena to look *at*, and each phenomenon may be looked *through* to the infinite facets of our subjective experience. So we have an infinity of infinities before us! We have nothing save the moment, but it is an awfully big moment.

The moment is mysterious, fascinating, and wondrous, yet we seldom live in it. We spend most of our day in yesterday or in tomorrow. Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensées*:

"We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming, as if in order to hasten its course; or we recall the past, to stop its too rapid

flight. So imprudent are we that we wander in the times which are not ours, and do not think of the only one which belongs to us; and so idle are we that we dream of those times which are no more, and thoughtlessly overlook that which alone exists. For the present is generally painful to us. We conceal it from our sight, because it troubles us; and if it be delightful to us, we regret to see it pass away. We try to sustain it by the future, and think of arranging matters which are not in our power, for a time which we have no certainty of reaching.

Let each one examine his thoughts, and he will find them all occupied with the past and the future. We scarcely ever think of the present; and if we think of it, it is only to take light from it to arrange the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means; the future alone is our end. So we never live, but we hope to live; and, as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable we should never be."

Why do we try to avoid the present moment? Do we dislike it? Or fear it? First, our obsession to quantify the world has caused us never to be quite satisfied. Even if we have performed well, we know we could perform better. Even if our circumstances are good, they could be better. So we look to the future. Second, we are basically insecure with ourselves, so we hold onto our memories as something constant (though they are not) and dependable in our existence. Thus we look to the past. We are afraid of throwing ourselves too deeply in the moment, because we are not sure what is there and we do not want to be stuck there if we dislike what we find. Frequently when a conversation between two people becomes very personal and intense, one or both of the individuals involved will pull back. There is a fundamental fear that prevents us from letting go.

Our failure to live the moment is responsible for many of our aches and sorrows. Numerous traffic deaths result from drivers who are in a hurry. Not satisfied with his present circumstance -- driving on the road -- a driver breaks the speed limit in order to get to the store or to get home. His mind is on his destination instead of his driving. Crash. Another typical example is that of the student who daydreams while in class rather than concentrating on the professor's lecture at hand. The consequences are obvious.

We find ourselves actually fighting the moment, doing everything in our power to avoid and deny it. As we make ourselves aware of the totality of the moment, we will begin to realize that to resist the moment is to fight life itself. To really *live will* require a complete turn-about in our approach. Rather than resist we will flow with the moment. Only when we let go of our fears and of ourselves, will we throw ourselves head-long into the moment. Then we will join ourselves to it and in some sense become the moment.

I used to live in opposition to the moment, and I was very much like a struggling actor trying to hit Broadway and never able to make it. As I have begun to experience living with, in, and as the moment, I have the curious sensation of sitting in the theater and watching myself on stage, saying, "Look! There's Richard Zenith talking with so-and-so. Now he's off doing this or that. Oh, he's in a tight spot! I wonder how he'll get out of it." There is an odd way in which we become detached from ourselves, as though our bodies continue along as before, while our spirits are free to excavate more of life's mysteries. Life becomes effortless; it is pure adventure. Instead of developing ourselves into great persons, we watch ourselves develop from the "great persons" we already are.

But as we apply this spontaneous approach to daily encounters, we immediately become frustrated and dissatisfied. We find ourselves habitually ringing our own death-knell: we compare. We compare that which is with that which is not. We compare our friends' house in Maine with our house in L.A., tonight's steak dinner with last week's, this rainy day with that sunny day. We must learn to enjoy each moment for what it is, without comparing it with other moments.

Surely comparison is indispensable to our basic function of making free choices. I can only properly choose a thing when I have compared it and judged it superior to the other items of its class. I go into the grocery store and buy a particular brand of string beans because they are cheaper or of better quality than the other brands. This is a positive use of my ability to compare. Comparison is akin to criticism. Both are constructive when employed to suggest areas that could be improved or to offer reasonable alternatives; both are destructive when they are used to make valuations which have no practical significance or application.

I presently get by on a small income. Therefore, to compare my efficiency apartment with a \$100,000 home down the road is destructive; I only denigrate my apartment by making such a comparison. On the other hand, to compare the color of the inside walls of my "efficiency" with those of the down the road is valid and constructive; I have sufficient funds to buy a can of paint and change the color of my walls.

Unfortunately we tend to squander great amounts of our energy in negative, destructive comparing. We are standing in a long line at the post office and we ramble on to ourselves: "Why don't they have more people on duty? I could be buying my groceries, or I could be at home reading a book. That stupid clerk is so slow. Oh, this is frustrating!" Yes, it is. We are comparing the present moment with moments that could be but are not. Our misdirected energy raises our blood pressure to an unhealthy level and upsets our psychological balance. If we had lived the moment for what it was, we might have become acquainted with the woman standing in back of us who would have told us about her pet leopard, or we might have devoted some thought to a decision we were considering, or we might have looked at the chart of postal rates and learned something for future reference, or we might have done a thousand other things. That is why I say that the moment is inexhaustible.

We will never experience eternal life as long as we are looking for eternal life. I suspect that when we all die and cross over into the new realm of our being, many people will still be waiting for eternal life to "happen." "Well, Lord," they will say, "where is it?" Only when we forget the future will we discover our eternal life: life lived in the eternal moment.

Our penchant to compare actual moments with finished moments has torn down many good marriages and friendships. We gloss over the "old times" we enjoyed with a special person, and we compare our present moments together and find them falling short of our magical memories. (The memories are "magical" because we have imagined our old times to be much more wonderful than they ever were). Or perhaps we are accustomed to engage in deep, esoteric conversation with a certain companion, and when on one occasion our discussion does not move beyond our thoughts on today's weather, we feel that our time together has not been profitable. We feel that "something has been lost." We tend to have certain expectations for a friendship, and when those expectations are not met we design new strategies that will steer the friendship into conformity with our expectations. When our strategies fail, the friendship breaks down. How much easier it is to stop resisting, to let our relationships go their own way without attempting to direct them. Is not the mere presence of a friend enough? We insist on constructing an edifice of words that we imagine to be somewhere suspended between us, and we consider it necessary to add on words continually to this ephemeral construction, lest it vanish. This is strange, because all around us there is life, and it would seem that a pair of friends ought to prefer their mutual presence in the quiet of *life* to their verbal edifice which only talks about life. If we immerse ourselves in the surge of What Is, then we free our friendships. We do not have to strive to maintain certain emotional or intellectual levels. Life is explosive; it does not consist in "levels."

Just as the comparison of present moments with past moments hinders the smooth flow of the social dimension of our being, so the comparison of present moments with future moments interferes with the balanced flow of the personal, psychological dimension. I have already mentioned how paralyzed we are by the fear of what might happen tomorrow or next week or next year. Our constant reference to a hypothetical future prevents us from ever exploiting what is already here.

Though some caution against possible danger preserves our health, a preoccupation with possibilities is certainly unhealthy. Overeating derives from failing to live the moment! Animals in the wild are never fat. Only man and the animals he cares for are capable of overeating. Only man is able to dupe himself by his own rational mind. As I sit at the supper table there lies in my psyche a powerful, subtle line of reasoning which says, *"Eat all you can now, because you never know what might happen. Tomorrow some grave misfortune may befall you, so that you will not have anything to eat. Therefore, eat more than you need now as a precautionary measure."* And if I am the guest at someone's dinner table, then the reasoning is less subtle: "You're obviously not going to be able to eat any of her delicious cheese-cake tomorrow, so even though your stomach is already full, why don't you eat another piece of cake 'for tomorrow'?" Diets place temporary restraints on our consumption of food, but we free ourselves from the lust for food when we start feeding on the moment. As we feed on the fullness of the ever-renewing, self-refreshing moment, we no longer desire to eat physical food that our bodies do not need. On the other hand, the food we do eat is all the more tasty and satisfying.

"Living the moment" is not a new therapeutic method for achieving peace and contentment. In fact, "living the moment" is simply a positive restatement of the last commandment given to Moses: *"Thou shalt not covet."* As used in the tenth commandment, "to covet" is to desire that which is not mine and which I cannot lawfully acquire. To live in the now is to take full advantage of what I presently have.

At a recent party I met a man who awarded me the privilege of hearing his discourse on the psychological ramifications (which he believed were negative) of converting to the metric system. The gentleman trapped me in a corner and began his lecture. Frankly, I was bored. Since I did not have the pluck to slither down into the ground and make my escape through his legs, I realized that I was doomed to captivity for at least ten minutes. Rather than dreaming about the ten thousand things I would rather be doing at that moment, I decided to make the most of the situation I was in. In ten minutes I was able to glean a better comprehension of the metric system, I picked up a bit of amateur psychology, and by observation I learned some things about men's hair dye (his was not very effective).

The moment is always exciting. We convert our boredoms into adventures. It is through the "boring" moments that we are forced to experience the beauty present in the most mundane details of life. We learn, finally, that nothing is boring. When someone asked Toscanini's son to name the highest point in his father's life, he replied, *"Every point in it is his highest point. He lives gloriously and fully every moment of his life, whether conducting an orchestra or peeling an orange."*

The moment is always exciting, but it is not always pleasant. The moment often hurts, but when we accept and do not resist the pain, then the hurting is minimized. Instead of attaching fears and stigmas to the pain on the basis of past or imagined moments, we let be what will be. There is a way in which we no longer feel the pain so sharply, because we *become* the pain.

Several months ago my dentist performed extensive work on my teeth. On one occasion I was feeling rather sharp pain from his drilling. I remembered in a flash all the awful dentist-chair accounts I had ever been told, and I braced myself for the expected torrents of pain.

With such anticipation, how could I not feel excruciating pain? Changing my perspective, I decided, *"All right, it's going to hurt, but hurting is a part of life that ought also to be experienced."* I felt the pain, but I was truthfully glad for it. "Wow! I'm feeling pain. I'm alive!" The pain was vindicated, because I allowed my sensation to take its course without automatically classifying it as negative.

We liberate our experience by not making demands on it. That is, by forgetting the future and so giving up our expectations for it, we free ourselves to relish this moment, and we no longer require the future moments to attain certain levels in order to please us. If I occupy my mind with a certain engagement I have planned for next week, then I will inevitably attach expectations to that engagement. If the actual engagement meets my expectations, then I will say to myself, "So what? That's what I was expecting." On the other hand, if the engagement, though profitable, is not what I expected it would be, then I will surely be disappointed.

Living the moment signifies real experience over and against the fictitious experiences that result from an obsession with the future and the monotonous two-dimensional experiences that result from a constant mental repetition of the past. It is a choice of living in reality (which is the eternal moment) or in unreality. Eternity is wholly beyond and wholly other than time or space, yet in attempting to connect the eternal moment to our world through a language that is founded on space-time dimensions, it is impossible to avoid the conceptions of space and time. Our language cannot adequately define the meaning of "living the moment"; we can only speak by analogy and illustration. True understanding will only come by experience.

We may be surrounded by troubles on all sides, but the eternal moment is wonderfully oblivious to all that is not here and now. I recall a telephone conversation with a young woman who spent ten or fifteen minutes detailing her psychological problems, her sexual problems, and a whole array of other sordid items. Finally she laughed and said, "The H_____ with it. Let's go to lunch!" That is living the moment.

God said to Moses, *"I Am Who I Am,"* and He gave no further account of Himself. Joined to Jesus Christ as one spirit, each one of us may also boldly proclaim, "I am who I am." Our identity no longer rests in what we possess, or what we have done, or what we will do. We identify ourselves with the eternal moment, the I Am which language cannot explain and which time cannot measure.