

David Freundlich

THE FEAR OF LIVING

Dedicated to the Thursday group on April 13, 1978 - Louise, Brian, Ed. Cecil, Rebecca, Lance, and Burton.

Many people are afraid of dying. Many more people are afraid of living but are not aware of this. In fact, those who are afraid of living are usually afraid of dying, since they don't want to die before they have lived.

I would like to describe the process whereby people become afraid to live and the ways they disguise this fear. Awareness of these forces allows you to see the choices you are making for or against life and the potential you have for changing.

LIVING SPONTANEOUSLY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Babies, young children, and animals live fully in the present moment. They live from their feelings, needs, and wants. They are alive and spontaneous, and totally here now. They experience each present moment and are not distracted by guilt over yesterday or worry about tomorrow. They are perfect examples of Gestalt living.

RIGHT NOW BECOMES PAINFUL

During the process of growing the present moment often becomes painful. This may occur initially in the womb, and for sure at birth when the fetus almost dies in the process of being born to life. You practically have to die before you can live.

Subsequent experiences of the child reaffirm that the present moment can be painful. Needs are unfulfilled and frustrated, and the child experiences hurt, pain, and fear. In order to protect himself, the child begins to deny his needs and pain and to shut off his feelings. The child becomes unreal by turning against his feelings and trying to please the parents. A basic assumption evolves: "If I'm myself I won't be loved. I'll be left alone and will die."

So, the early experience of living each present moment fully becomes eroded by hurt, fear, aloneness, and pain. The vulnerability to pain in the present moment drives the child away from his feelings, needs, wants, energy, and spontaneity. The priority shifts from living now to protection against pain. Experiencing the present moment becomes lost.

AVOIDING THE PAINFUL NOW

Since the process of life changes from living in the moment to the priority of avoiding pain, you begin to make these choices:

- safety, security, and protection
- sameness and predictability
- control, power, and rigidity
- manipulation of others
- following rules, regulations, and "shoulds"
- boring habits, patterns, and routines which you then complain about
- pleasing others and worrying about what they think
- guilty preoccupation with the past
- worrying about the future
- thinking and fantasizing about life
- worrying about other people, helping them, and trying to solve their problems
- working too hard
- gossiping about others
- talking about how life could be if . . .

These are ways you avoid living now in order to prevent yourself from experiencing pain in the present moment. You have chosen protection from the pain of living; you have abandoned living and experiencing your life.

FILLING UP TIME

Life is a time slot of consecutive present moments. You breathe air and your heart beats only right now. Since you have been fighting off the potential for pain in the present moment for years, a major problem of life is how to keep busy and obliterate feeling the present moment. Fortunately, there is an abundance of shoulds, have to's, responsibilities, problems, pressures, duties, cleaning, getting organized, going through the motions, trivial and busy work to fill up most of your life. Since getting these things done becomes a priority, you can justify the position, "I don't have time to live now." In addition, time fillers are done under the guise of getting ready to live once these things are "out of the way." That day never comes. What does come is the depressing feeling, "What have I done with my life? Life is passing me by and I haven't lived."

Instead of experiencing the important things in life, your existence becomes a preoccupation with the less important. You bitterly complain about this, but your time is conveniently filled up and you are kept busy so as not to experience the pain and anxiety of living in the present moment. You and your life become unimportant, purposeless, and meaningless, because your time wasters are safe but insulate you from the anxiety of experiencing important things.

Have you noticed how people who live fully seem to have more time to experience life, while those who are protecting themselves against the pain of life never seem to have time for anything?

THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING PROBLEMS

People fantasize a time of having no more problems so then they could start living. This "If I had no more problems then. . ." formula is an illusion. What would you do with your life if you had no more problems or worries or things to get done and out of the way? Have you ever felt the panic of having extra time with nothing to do? How quickly do you quell that panic by filling up the void or vacuum, even before it arises, by conjuring up something to do. The anxiety of living creatively in the moment is bypassed once again.

At that moment of empty time, which you bitterly complain about never having, you run like Hell. As stated by Rev. John R. Struzzo, you are confronted by "the fear of nothingness, the horror of emptiness." The loss of purpose and meaning in your life begins to surface. This existential void expands each moment you turn your back on living life right now. To avoid the pain of now you have gone far away from the moment, your feelings, needs, and wants, from real contact with others, from the things which really matter in your life. You become an empty shell, an unfeeling robot, merely trying to "get through" life without experiencing it. The baby, small child, and animal do not have this vacuum because they experience each moment of living.

The payoff for having problems, worries, and too many things to do is that they are convenient excuses to avoid the risk and anxiety of living now. Life becomes "getting rid of problems" (a garbage disposal existence) instead of a creative process of choice and experiencing each moment.

The fear of living now hides behind the excuses, problems, and busy work, and you create the attitude, "I don't have time to live now." Having problems certainly diverts attention from the fear of living.

THE FEAR OF LIVING NOW

Living now means feeling the present moment: having, feelings, needs, and wants: making choices and decisions, being responsible for yourself: taking risks: being with people: experiencing the unknown and unsure: being vulnerable: allowing spontaneity to replace certainty: dealing with the unpredictable: confronting anxiety and pain, newness and something different: and determining some direction in your life right now.

The more you have sought protection against the pain of living now, the more you avoid experiencing the now, and the more living in the present becomes a threat.

BLAMING AND EXCUSES FOR NOT LIVING NOW

You do everything possible to avoid the pain of living in the moment, and at the same time complain about the things which are "stopping" you from living now.

It is easier and safer to say, "I want to live now but I can't because of my excuses," rather than admit to yourself, "I'm afraid to risk living now and I'm hiding behind excuses which I complain about."

It is easier and safer to say, "If only I had "x" or could do "y" then I could live now," rather than admit to, "I'm afraid to live now so I'll blame it on "x" or "y"."

The simple fact is, "I'm afraid to live now and I'm afraid to admit this, so I'll blame not living on various excuses and shift responsibility away from myself."

THE PAYOFFS FOR NOT CHANGING

Everybody suffers from chronic self-destructive habits and everybody wants to change and be different. Why then do people tenaciously hang on to maladaptive behaviour, attitudes and feelings and find it so difficult to change? There are tremendous advantages for remaining the same and stuck in dull, self-defeating modes of non-living:

- They are familiar and predictable.
- They are easy and require no effort.
- They are safe and secure.
- They control anxiety, although ineffectively.
- They avoid the unknown and different.
- They provide excuses for not taking risks.
- They avoid self responsibility and perpetuate blame and excuses
- They avoid making decisions and choices.
- They avoid knowing what you feel, need and want.
- They allow you to passively complain instead of taking action
- They gain you sympathy, pity and dependency.
- They allow you to manipulate others through helplessness, guilt and a "poor me" attitude.
- They justify "I can't help it" and "I can't do it."
- THE OLD SELFDESTRUCTIVE WAYS PAY OFF BY NOT LETTING YOU EXPERIENCE THE ANXIETY OF LIVING AT THIS MOMENT.

Choosing responsibility to live each moment

The choice you make each moment of your life is between experiencing your life now by feeling the spontaneity, excitement, anxiety and unpredictability of the present moment, or not experiencing your life now by "living" in the

past or future in your head, thinking your way through life, blaming various excuses for not living, and protecting yourself against life.

The only moment you live and experience is right now.

You can hold on or let go

Now tomorrow I have to do the laundry, next week I have to answer some letters, next month I have to pay the car insurance, next year I have to paint the apartment, at 65 I have to apply for Medicare.
. . . . My God, will I be able to finish my life before I die,?

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Dina Leveille

A PRIVATE TRAVAIL

The pain comes in waves. There are periods of remission. Several hours, sometimes a day - a **whole day**; and then, WHAM! It's as though there was a big hole in my body, right in the middle: from the chest down to the pelvis, a huge, gaping void. Stabs of pain radiate up and downwards, up into my breasts so that I have to rub my nipples, and my diaphragm tightens into a stone, so that I have to make a conscious effort to breathe again. Breathe in - breathe out; "keep breathing", George Kohlrieser kept saying. I keep breathing: draw air in, push it out, in-out, in-out, and the oesophagus tight like a rope. I do it faster. It's a bit like panting, during childbirth.

But this is no childbirth. There is no child at the other end of the tunnel. There's only this void, this huge amputated emptiness. Every muscle in my throat is taut like a string, my eyes tingle with unshed tears.

I get down on my knees, on a pillow in front of my couch. Pray? No, I'm not going to pray. Goddammit, I sure as hell ain't going to **pray**! I raise my arms well above my head and bring them down, hard, on the couch with a "harr", like the sound of a wild beast tearing at its catch. I do it again and again, I beat and beat on the couch like I was felling a tree, the growl comes every time, it comes from inside me, from the big hole in my insides, "harr" - arms up; I bend my back and lean forward: arms down, "harr", up-down, "harr". . . My breath comes in short gasps, I've been chopping that tree for