

FEATURED ARTICLES

The Rapture of Being Alive

by Mary O'Malley

Thinking, thinking, thinking. It is said that we have 65,000 thoughts a day, and 95% of them are repeats from the day before; you'd think we'd get bored! From the moment we open our eyes in the morning until after we close them at night, our attention attaches itself to thought and then goes wherever it goes, with hardly a thought about thinking. A wise master once described humanity as "lost in thought," and all the time we are lost, life passes before us in a blur.

If we are lucky, we will have a moment or two throughout the day when we truly see a loved one's face, or fully taste a bite of food, or intimately feel the wind caress our cheek. Usually, though, thought closes around these experiences, throwing us back into its endless maze. This seeming addiction to thought may be one of the reasons that *Ally McBeal* is such a popular television program: it shows us the thinking that accompanies most of our experiences.

But thought is not the villain. Thought is an exquisite tool that took the universe 15 billion years to create. It is a tool for discerning reality, not reality itself. As Alan Watts, the Zen teacher, once said, "no matter how many times you say the word water, it will never be wet!"

The "wetness" of life is calling to us. Try this experiment. After you read this paragraph, for just a few moments, let go of the past and the future, and bring your attention to the



sounds around you. Listen, *really listen*. Be present for your life. When your attention goes back into thinking about life, as it surely will, bring it back. Be curious. Every sound you are hearing is brand new, never having been heard before and never to be heard again. If your mind wanders, interest it in seeing how many different sounds you can hear. You are listening to life the moment it appears out of mystery!

One of the most powerful things we can do is to strengthen the "muscle" of our attention by simply returning to what is, right now, over and over again throughout the day.

To listen in this way moves you beyond *ideas about life* into fully engaging with the living moment and all of the wonder, joy, and support that reside there. Joseph Campbell understood our longing for the living moment: "People say what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

We long for the rapture of being alive. We long for those moments when we pop out of the stream of thought and truly connect, those moments where our mind, body, and heart are in the same place at the same time. While our mind frantically searches for this experience, what it's seeking is right here, right now, in the living moment of life.

Stephen Levine, recognized for his leading-edge work with death and dying, says that many people on their deathbeds speak the grief of having 'missed their life.' "It can't end now. It hasn't started yet," said one 93-year-old woman. Because we do not see that we are lost in ideas most of our lives, the living moment goes by untouched, unexperienced.

How can we awaken to the living moments of life? One of the most powerful things we can do is to strengthen the "muscle" of our attention by simply returning to what is, right now, over and over again throughout the day. It is skillful to choose a focus, something you do repeatedly during the day: drinking tea, washing hands, answering the phone. You take one deep breath and be as present as possible for the experience. In this returning, you discover the extraordinariness of even the most ordinary things. You also see that there is a big difference between being in a conversation about life and being fully in it. Over time, each moment of returning adds a drop of water to your bucket of awakening. One day, in the not-too-distant future, you will discover that your bucket is overflowing.

Know that you won't do this perfectly. Some days you will be able to return more often than others. Don't judge your progress; just be willing to return. Know that just a few moments of pure attention, sprinkled throughout your day, will transform your life in ways that your heart deeply longs for.

Learning how to quiet our mind so that we can be intimately and passionately present for life is an unfolding process, the work of a lifetime. Along the way, we gather patience, compassion, curiosity, trust, and the willingness to show up for the life we have been

given. The payoff is nothing less than the rediscovery of the rapture of being fully alive. I invite you to cultivate moments of pure attention throughout your day, knowing that in each moment of returning you are healing not only your own life, but also the world. You are nothing less than the universe waking up to itself.

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