

The shadows of the now

By [David Williams](#)

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There's a common thread out there, a thought that gets passed along like a little nugget of meme-profundity.

You must live in the now. Don't let yourself be entangled by what was or what will be. Be completely and fully aware of this moment. It's a ... cough ... gift.

"That is why they call it the present," says the Zen Turtle Master from Kung Fu Panda.

There is deep truth in that saying, a truth that can liberate us from past brokenness. There is truth in it because it can turn us away from the grasping, anxious struggle to shape all of existence through the sheer force of our desire.

Being able to live in the timeless now is a potent awareness, as potent as the energies of singularity. For what is the now but a temporal singularity, an ineffably irreducible point in the flow of being? It both is infinitely calm and infinitely full of memory and potential.

Sorry. Getting a little flaky-sounding there, but I roll that way sometimes. Being in the now can still you and silence fears and open you up to new things. It's a good way to be, a part of the way of the mystic, which I live with varying degrees of success.

As with all things, though, there is a shadow cast by this truth.

Because now is not all that we are. We are beings of story, whose existence is wrought of both narrative and potential.

But if our now is just that instant, then we can be in a moment in which we have forgotten our history. We lose sight of the story that has brought us to where we are. We can lose sight of our call to bend the story of our little world towards justice and reconciliation.

If our now is pursued shallowly, it can become nothing more than a validation of our immediate reality, of the desires of the instant, of the hungers of the moment, and of the demands of our society. Why else would mindfulness be so present in our corporate culture, pitched out as a tool to increase personal productivity?

Justice and growth require that we see our "now" as stretching back into the "now" that was, seeing our personal and corporate past as it truly existed.

And if we are in the now, we are in a moment where there is no future, nothing but this instant. Which, if you're sanctified or enlightened, you'll embrace. It can also \*feel\* fine when you're well-fed and content, knowing neither pain nor loss, when all can seem well and good.

But "be in the now" can be the worst possible advice to the situationally or clinically depressed. It is the cruelest dismissal to the starving or the imprisoned or the violated. It can tear away the resilience that hope provides.

I have known those moments. There were moments, "presents" in my life, when, had I not seen life beyond them, I would have rather ceased to be. I have known souls who have taken their lives because they could see nothing other than what was, in the ephemera of that instant, their reality.

Because hope requires us to stretch our now out towards the now that has not yet come to pass. That is right there, at hand, so close we can almost touch it.

But to walk that Way, we must knock, seek, and ask.

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