

DEFINING THE MOMENT

Jim Lehrman

The word “moment” gets thrown about often in our language. While it is often used in some way related to time or duration, no one seems to know how *long* a moment is. I define the word *moment* to be the amount of time that passes between one focus of attention and the next focus of attention. How long that takes varies from person to person, context to context, and *moment by moment*.

For 1 week in my therapy practice in Seattle in 1991, I selected about 10 clients to ask if they would participate in an experiment that I would do at some random time in the session. Even with me explaining I couldn't describe what I had in mind because having it be a surprise was part of the experiment, every one of them agreed to participate.

So, with their permission, we proceeded to do our work together, then, at some point well into the session - but always when I was the one talking - I would jump out of my chair, lunge at them, and roar loudly with my arms flailing and my eyes bulging.

While all clients showed some reaction, some stayed in their chairs while some ran out of the room. And, after getting each one to settle back down into the chair, I would begin Part 2 of the experiment. With the client having regained composure, I asked him or her to describe to me the sequence of everything that happened in their experience.

The results covered a spectrum ranging from a client saying "I saw you do that, and I got really scared, then I ran out of the room" to another client saying "I saw you coming at me, with your energy getting all bigger like that, and my hands grabbed the armrests of the chair. My belly got real contracted and tight. Then my arms got rigid at the same time that my feet got planted really well to the floor. My lower legs got really stiff and my back went back into the chair. There was a voice in me - like a scream - telling me 'get out - NOW!' - and then, as suddenly as I heard that, there was another voice inside telling me "it's okay - he's just doing that experiment". With that my belly just sort of melted and then, like a wave receding, my back, my arms, hands, legs, and feet, all relaxed and I took in a deeper breath, and felt myself sink comfortably back into the chair."

What's particularly noteworthy is that the reactions of these two people covered the same amount of time. While the experience they each described lasted about 5 seconds, the person in the first example was able to notice 3 events in his experience but the second person was able to notice about 17 events in that same 5 second period. Thus, the second client exercised a more developed ability to pay attention to the moment. This person experiences more “MPMs” than the first client - more moments per minute. Plus, notice this person was able to see more clearly what was really going on and respond more effectively. This person's experience in the moment is richer.

Like being able to take in more details of your environment when you're moving slower, or like the samurai who quiets his mind enough to snatch a fly out of the air with his chopsticks, there are ways to slow your attention down to notice more details that would otherwise be missed. The more that you notice, the more you can take in, appreciate, and address, and the more effective you can be, and the more full your experience is.

Being present, being in the moment, is not so esoteric. It's something that can be developed. There are exercises that you can learn, practice, and build upon. Being present, seeing clearly what a situation calls for and being able to respond accordingly and effectively, and having a reliably close relationship with fulfillment, all start with strengthening your ability to slow down and pay attention.

A path of development starts simply. Before attempting to track triggered elements of your experience, before being able to observe the mechanics of how you create your experience in the moment, being able to simply notice the movements of your attention is required.

TRACKING THE FLOW OF ATTENTION

Here's an exercise intended to get you more sensitively aware of two things: the shifts in your focus of attention (which define your moments) and what each object of your attention is as you shift:

Sitting or standing with your eyes open, spend 60 seconds letting your mind go wherever it wants to. Simply let your attention wander and latch onto anything that pulls it in, whether that be visual, auditory, physical, or thoughts, memories, or emotions.

But for these 60 seconds, consciously track each time that your attention shifts from one object to the next. It's fine to notice the content - what the object is that your attention has shifted to - but don't indulge any stories about it. Just let your attention go where it wants while you be the observer of this process, consciously tracking each occurrence of a shift of attention.

If you do indulge the content of where your attention goes, then treat each new thought as a new object of attention. As an example, let's say you notice a chair across the room - that's a new object of your attention. A microsecond later you remember the yard sale where you got the chair - that's the next object of your attention. Then you remember who you ran into there - yet another new object of your attention. Then you wonder what that person meant by what he or she said - yet another one. Track each of these places your mind goes as simply being another object of attention: *now this, now this, now this.*

Don't write anything down; don't say things to yourself to acknowledge what you're doing. Just simply notice.

If you have any judgments or thoughts about what you're doing, simply notice that, too, as a shift of attention. If you want, do this several times a day (it's only 60 seconds) but whether you do it once a day or several times make sure you lock in both your intention and attention on this exercise for the duration of the 60 seconds.

This exercise trains you to get bigger than your attention, to become the observer of the movements of your attention, of the pull of attention, and of your relationship to attention. It's not about the content of your attention, it's about the process, the flow.

If you're one of the people who think you are your thoughts, that your thoughts are you, then consider this: A thought is made up of content, content that you would not experience if your attention wasn't focused on it. But if you're the observer of the movement of your attention, are you the observer or the thing being observed?

Think of your attention being like a wild horse. Doing this exercise is like holding the reins of that horse. For these 60 seconds you find that you can hold the reins of that horse no matter where it goes. This ability will progressively carry over into your moment-to-moment life. Depending on circumstances, you can hold the reins and let it go to something it wants to indulge, or can pull it away or pull it towards something you want to put attention onto.