

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #20
LIVE FULLY IN THE PRESENT

As we get involved in the passing days of the new year, I wonder how many of us can say that we have done no looking backwards as we cross the threshold into this year. Certainly New Year's Eve and Day is quite often a time of looking into the past and thinking over the difficult experiences, the tragedies, the complications. If you have given much time to dealing with the past, it is time to realize that you are using mental energy that could well be used to good advantage to making the present more desirable.

Let me tell you a story about a woman who was deprived of several years of happiness because of her failure to adjust to change. When she was only thirty years old, her husband suddenly passed away. It was a tragic event--he had been making a good salary, and they had spent their money freely, buying on credit what they wanted. At the time of his passing, they had a townhouse and a beach house both with a full staff of servants. They also had three cars and expensive furniture and appliances in their homes. Yet, very few of the possessions were paid for. Unwisely, the husband carried no life insurance and so to this young woman's grief was added tremendous financial worry for her own future and for that of her little girl.

Fortunately, she had worked before her marriage, and she was able to find a good job, but since she was away from home all the day, she had to have a housekeeper and nurse for her daughter. Her friends knew that she was having a difficult time meeting all of her expenses, but pride kept her from accepting any offers of help from anyone. Although she put on a gallant appearance, it was obvious that she was deeply troubled mentally and emotionally. She talked constantly about her husband whose pictures were in every room in the house. Gradually, her expensive possessions disappeared one by one until she had only her townhouse left. Her earnings were not enough to keep up the house, pay the maids, and meet the other expenses; she was getting more and more in debt.

In desperation she turned to one good friend for advice. This friend had a long talk with her, and advised her to sell the house, which was after all much too large for her. The woman admitted that months earlier she had tried to sell the house without any success, and during the conversation she admitted that her physical needs demanded that she sell the house, but in her heart she was really afraid someone would buy it, and she didn't want them to because the house had meant so much to her husband and because she felt close to him when she was there. Her friend said to her, "My dear, you have been living in the past, holding on in thought to all the emotional experiences and material reminders of your husband. You will never be able to sell that house until you let it go mentally." So after more conversation, the woman finally admitted to herself that she had neglected the present for the past, that she had literally submerged herself in memories, regret, remorse, and self-pity. She knew now that this was a mistake, that it was self-destructive, so she intended to begin to make some changes, to correct her ways of thinking.

As a first step, she would work and pray to sell the house. Within a week, now that she had really let it go in consciousness, the house was sold to someone who said she loved it the moment she saw it. The buyer also bought most of the furniture. Then the woman got herself a smaller home and was able to pay off her debts. She was free from worry and fear, but most of all she stopped living in the past, and she became once again the normal living person, looking forward to a future.

Continued grief over the loss of a loved one and living over the past in memory can certainly prevent us from living an active, useful life in the present. This is so often the case with individuals. Time obliterates all troubles, all griefs, all unhappy experiences. If we could have enough spiritual strength to think of any seeming trouble with the thought that everything passes away, we would save ourselves endless worry and unhappiness. We know that nature which is the divine activity in expression heals physical wounds. In her unfathomable power nature also

heals mental wounds and restores the mind to balance and power if we would just let it happen.

The greatest proof of love that the living can give the dead is not in space, in grief for a long time which does no good, but in transforming the time into useful work. Grief for yesterday transmitted into worthwhile work today turns sorrow into joy; it turns futile inactivity into useful service; it turns past experience into a new creative process. Thus, the past becomes a guide for the present, not an anchor into the past. Keeping our thoughts on the past, longing for what no longer exists, regretting mistakes we have made, mentally reviewing our sins...all these tend to block the channel through which our present good comes to us. Even though memories of the past may well be happy, we can't afford to look back on them too frequently because by so doing we use our mental power in a reverse way that should be applied to the things at hand. So, our mental power actually becomes destructive. Gloating over old achievements or victories, being content with what we have done in the past is as much a hinderance to growth as regret for past mistakes. Without growth our body and mind stagnate. We must be willing to let go, to forget old experiences. No matter whether they are good or bad, let them go, release them, get into the flow of the ongoingness of life.

Jesus warned his disciples not to return to the earthly pasttimes of eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and harvesting. He cautioned them saying, "Whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." While this is a command to let go of worldly goods and pursuits, it can also be interpreted to mean that spiritual growth and fulfillment comes only to us by relinquishing our life in the past, by letting go of that which is yesterday. I suppose the greatest Biblical illustration of man's ability to let go and to forget the things that are behind is the story of Paul. Before his conversion, he was violently opposed to Jesus. He stoned Steven, and prosecuted followers of Jesus. Yet, ultimately he was able to forget it all and to devote his life to spreading the new-age idea, the truth that once he had absolutely condemned.

How often we brood over past experience, reliving it in memory, digging it deeper and deeper into our consciousness instead of dragging it out and refusing it power. How often we hold on to thoughts of resentment toward others for some real or fancied slight. How often we suffer remorse and regret over some mistake that we have made. How often we boast of past deeds. Whatever it is that we retain in our mind, we cannot hope to grow spiritually until we learn to let it all go and cast it all out. Dwell on an injury in thought or gloat over old defeats or wallow in grief is a futile attempt to bring the dead to life, to retrieve the irretrievable, and it keeps our emotions so agitated that we cannot think clearly about the present or face the future with hope and courage.

Add to this the unassailable fact that the past can never be recovered, then we can see clearly the necessity of living in the present, for thinking and acting and speaking according to the immediate prompting of the divine flow within us. To live fully in the present does not mean that we must adopt a philosophy of hedonism or of putting off until tomorrow whatever is unpleasant, or that we cannot profit from the past. If we have faith that what has happened in our lives is preparation for our ultimate good, then past experiences will serve as a guiding light in meeting the problems and challenges of today.

Living fully in the present means that we are free in mind and heart from the shackles of the past and from fear of the future. It means forgetting and forgiving our own error that caused the trespass of others against us. It means appreciating and using the gifts that God has given us not only the gifts of material things, but the gifts of love and life and beauty, of spiritual insight and of faith. It means practicing the presence of God each and every day. So we say live fully in the present.