

Booker T. Washington's Rule for Living

In an 1895 speech, Booker T. Washington [shared this parable](#) about a ship lost in saltwater seas and dangerously out of drinking water. Suddenly, the lost ship sees another friendly vessel:

From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: 'Water, water. We die of thirst.' The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' A second time, the signal, 'Water, send us water!' went up from the distressed vessel. And was answered: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' A third and fourth signal for water was answered: 'Cast down your bucket where you are.'

Finally, "the captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River." The lost ship had drifted into safety.

Washington shared his parable as a lesson about race relations. His wisdom is also a guide to our experience of life.

In this age of COVID-19, it is easy to think life is on hold. One day, some tell themselves, when a COVID-19 vaccine is proclaimed "safe and effective," we'll get back to living a full life.

"Cast down your bucket where you are" is an admonition to be more present in this moment, in this life.

A few weeks ago, I was out walking my daily loop with an elevation gain of 450 feet. The day was hot and humid; my head filled with thoughts of how miserable I felt. Approaching the first break in the climb, I uncharacteristically turned around

in retreat, my miserable thoughts intact.

Voices rang out as I started down the hill. "Barry," shouted four of my neighbors, waving me to turn around and join them.

Present, and engaging them in conversation, my thought-induced misery vanished.

In her book [*Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*](#), Winifred Gallagher offers this guidance: "Who you are, what you think, feel, and do, what you love—is the sum of what you focus on."

It was good to be reminded: The focus of my attention, not the world, creates my experience of life.

Does my life have any meaning? is a question many ponder. Today, [*among the young*](#), suicidal thoughts are rampant.

What if we could find meaning in our lives by being present to what now offers?

We live only in the present, but often our attention is on the past or future. *If only. I should have. They should have. How dare they. When will they...?*

Out of thoughts beginning with *what if?* we spin elaborate scenarios. Polly Berends observes in her book, [*Coming to Life*](#), there is a "tendency is to rush ahead after a what if. What if I can't? What if they won't? These 'what ifs' lure and threaten us into the future, making us take thought for ourselves and drowning out the thoughts that God is having for us."

Often, our attention goes to forming opinions about things that are none of our business. Or, we notice a slight mistake someone makes, and we're annoyed. Such mental habits mask the now. A call to "cast down your bucket" does not get through to us.

[Research shows](#) that the act of remembering is a faulty recreation of the past tainted by our current thinking. Regarding the future, shifting the spotlight away from speculation and attempts to control the uncontrollable helps us embrace what is in front of us.

Berends explains what might change if we understood our Source is Love: “The more we know that we are loved [by God], the more lovingly we are seeing. The more lovingly we are seeing, the more loving we are being.”

About meaning, Berends has this to say, “Meaning disappears when wanting takes over.” She adds, “We are just reacting to our experience... and thinking of what we want, what we suppose we know is best... But then the problem isn’t really meaninglessness; it’s the temper tantrum, the blind rage that won’t see good.”

Berends offers us a simple example of presence shared by a young mother, at a time before the coronavirus:

We were sitting in Brooklyn on the front stoop, my husband, our two-year-old daughter, and I. My daughter was in her party dress. Amazingly, even though she had worn it to a party, it was still clean. So we thought, maybe if we put her in a raincoat to eat this ice cream cone, she can keep her dress clean for one more wearing. There she was in her raincoat in the hot sun, and the ice cream was running all over the place. She was a complete mess. And it didn’t matter. It was so wonderful. ‘You know, Mark,’ I said to my husband, ‘I think this is as good as it gets.’

As Berends shared the story, she anticipated what you might be thinking: “You may say, so what? Big deal! Why shouldn’t she enjoy watching her daughter eat ice cream? She had no big problems to worry about.”

Notice your own life. Berends cautions, “[We] almost always think we have something more important to worry about, so we

are almost never aware of the fact that at least for this one moment everything is perfect.”

Berends gives a long list of distracting thoughts the mother could have been having. Here are a few:

What will the neighbors think of her wearing such a warm coat in August? Watch out! It’s dripping!... What am I doing wasting my time here when I have so much more important work to do before I go to the office tomorrow?... She shouldn’t have so much sugar... What are we going to have for supper? Which of us is going to fix it? Who’s going to go to the store?

The mother kept her focus on the now; her thinking was not removing her from making the most of the present. Berends encourages us to engage in prayer and “momentarily set aside all impressions” of “what seems to be going on and what we think we want and need and what we think we are for—in order to allow ourselves to be inspired.”

As we set aside needless thinking, what seems meaningless becomes meaningful. No matter how much the world seems to be weighing us down, we can “cast down [our] bucket where [we] are” and find new possibilities. As we shift the focus of our attention, so changes our experience of life.

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