

A Perfect Moment

Have you ever experienced a perfect moment? An interval of time during which you feel such a sense of peace, wonder, and beauty that nothing can disturb you? An instant in which time itself seems to pause and release its hold on you, past and future fall away, taking with them all anxieties, hurts and upsets? The very thought of them becomes laughably irrelevant. Nothing can disturb the peace of your being. And in the sparkling present that is now all that remains of time, the absolute perfection of everyone and everything reveals itself. Nothing is wrong, nothing out of place; all is for the best. As the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, “And all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”¹

I have been blessed with several such moments.

Hiking a sandy path along the shoreline of a remote fjord above the Arctic Circle in Norway, a brisk, steady wind, moist with salt spray, whipping off the choppy waters a mere thirty yards to my left. The path threads its way through a field of clover: thousands of tiny plants, their leaves gleaming bright emerald in the sunlight. Nestled within each plant, balanced perfectly at the juncture of its three leaves, sits a tiny bead of water condensed from the blowing sea spray. Each droplet catches

the light of this eternal summer sun and reflects it back at me, winking. I walk through a field of scintillating scattered diamonds—stars fallen to grace the earth. I glance left and right, ahead, behind. Everywhere my gaze settles, a thousand pearls of light sparkle and daze me with their bright joyous laughter. My journey loses all sense of purpose. No goal, no endpoint. Only the insistent embrace of wind and sea commingled with the sparkling pinpoints of light. A perfect moment.

A warm day in spring. Seated on the New Haven Green, with a picnic lunch spread out on the manicured lawn to be shared among friends. The sky is an impossible shade of blue. A warm breeze wafts through my hair in a caress gentler than any mother's. Each individual blade of grass shines resplendent in the sunlight, as if lit from within. I brush my fingers across the tips of the luminous green blades, sifting them through my fingers as I might stroke the skin of a lover. And I know, with total conviction, that this moment is nothing less than Eden before the Fall. Perfection itself. A perfect moment.

Floating on my back atop a calm Appalachian lake at sunset, buoyed by a float resting just beneath my knees so that I am weightless, suspended, with no effort whatsoever on my part. The contours of my body dissolve into the water's liquid warmth. My face is cradled by a gentle circle of water that leaves only eyes, nose, and mouth exposed to the cooling mountain air. Above me, the clear purpling sky extends seemingly without limit, until it nips and kisses the water at the very edges of my vision. My breaths come slow and even—a gentle rolling motion—like the distant hills. I am sky and lake,

water and air, within and without—all one, all at peace. A perfect moment.

One particularly powerful depiction of such a moment comes towards the end of Eugene O'Neill's brilliant autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, the saga of a family crippled by alcoholism and mental illness. The youngest son, a sailor, has just heard his miserly, alcoholic father admit to selling out for easy money when he could have become a great Shakespearean actor—an unusually sincere confession considering its source, full of regret and dashed hopes. In return, the son shares with his father one of his finest moments.

I was on the Squarehead, square rigger, bound for Buenos Aires. Full moon in the trades. The old hooker driving fourteen knots. I lay on the bowsprit, facing astern, with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself—actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way.²

Perfect moments such as these needn't last more than an instant, though they can play out over minutes or even hours.

Their duration is irrelevant, however, because once experienced, you can never again look at the world in quite the same way. You are changed. You've had a taste of something greater than your day-to-day self—of heaven on earth, one might say—a state of mind so radically apart from what you usually experience that, even when you return to the routine ordinariness of it all (or worse, to life's unanticipated trials and tragedies), you're no longer affected in the same way. You feel protected—swaddled in a peace that comes not from this world.

When the mirror of perception quietly shatters, when you pierce the veil of Never-Mind, this is the world you behold. You enter a perfect moment: the world seen through the eyes of Ever-Mind. *A Course in Miracles* calls this the *real world*. It rarely comes to us as a result of any particular event. Winning the big game, getting accepted to an Ivy League college, landing the deal of a lifetime, or finally hearing the words “I love you” from the lips of your beloved—these produce jubilation, triumph, relief perhaps, but as a rule they do not propel us into perfect moments.

French novelist Marcel Proust experienced a series of perfect moments throughout his life, each triggered, not by some event, but by a random, seemingly trivial perception: the taste of a soft cookie soaked in tea, the lines formed by the spires of a cathedral in the town of Martinville, stepping upon two uneven paving stones and momentarily losing balance. Can we honestly say that these were the *cause* of Proust's perfect moments? If so, then we would expect everyone to be compulsively dipping cookies in tea.

The Martinville cathedral would become a shrine to rival Lourdes.

The truth is, we don't know why such moments come to us when they do, other than the fact that Ever-Mind is always present, waiting in the wings, so to speak, for any opportunity we give it to step forth. After the fact, we make inferences about why this moment happened to occur. It was the linearity of cathedral spires, the sparkling pearls of light within the clover, the tossing of the ship on the waves in the moonlight. But this is the action of the ego trying to reassert itself and link the perfect moment to its world of things and events. It is also an attempt to retrace the path by which we arrived at the perfect moment, as if there were only one avenue leading there and we'd better not lose the directions. We try to preserve the moment, to etch it into memory and file it away, cataloged according to the circumstances that brought it about, like a museum specimen—some rainbow-winged dragonfly from a prehistoric era trapped forever in a block of amber. We pull up the memory on special occasions, view it in our minds, and sigh wistfully. Or we use it to bolster our unique sense of self, our specialness: "Let me tell you what happened to *me* one afternoon sitting on the New Haven Green!"

As a decades-long student of *A Course in Miracles*, I find that brief slices of perfect moments come my way often now. I need only pause and reflect that I have a choice, and then make the decision to shift from ego to Holy Spirit, from Never-Mind to Ever-Mind, from OS2 to OS1. The perfect moment has little to do with what is perceived out there in the world, because there *is* nothing *out there* to

constitute a world. The perfect moment has everything to do with the *self*, the one that is doing the perceiving. Where Never-Mind sees objects, bodies, and events that busily shift and change, Ever-Mind beholds only perfection. It knows nothing else.

Now that I understand this, the truly puzzling question for me is, why do I still fall back into Never-Mind with such regularity? Why is it so easy to default to OS2 and forget there is another option? Why do we resist the call of Spirit when we know how good it feels? If there were a restaurant dishing up Ever-Mind or a church that offered it with the Sunday sermon, there would be lines around the block. People become addicted to heroin, alcohol, sex, food, high-risk sports, gambling—all of which result in a feeling of elation. Why don't we pursue our true Self with even a fraction of the same determination?

If the perfect moment is our best and most immediate example of Ever-Mind, then perhaps we would benefit by trying to understand it better.

Elements of the Perfect Moment

It seems almost silly to take an experience like the perfect moment, put it under a magnifying glass, and attempt to dissect it into its component parts. Wholeness cannot be grasped with the tools of fragmentation. But if we hope to understand such moments, then it will prove helpful to explore them more deeply.

What are the key elements that make up a perfect moment?