The Moment as a Factor in Emotional Well-Being

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ABSTRACT: The moment is a phenomenon of increasing interest to observers of human experience, whether their concern be literature, art, theology, psychology, history, or sports. For in the moment an individual's sense of reality is heightened and his capacity for choice is intensified. Among the situations where our sense of reality can both reflect and produce a significant level of emotional well-being are moments where presentness is keenly felt, interpersonal relationships, kinetic experiences in sports, the sense of being inspired, moments of commitment, highly dramatic presentations of the self, and peak experiences. The literature is extensive.

In this paper I bring together and discuss references to a phenomenon which has long been casually recognized but until recently not subjected to any serious analysis. "Moments" are very short segments of time, so short, indeed, as to be generally unmeasurable; so distinctive in structure and flavor as to lie essentially outside time; so intricately woven of diverse elements as to be virtually undefinable. Yet this much can be said: in a moment, the steady flow of time seems to halt; some long-extended process may be consummated or realized; apparently disparate factors are brought together and propelled in new directions; assumed boundaries may be challenged; hidden or unthought elements revealed; a sense of meaning experienced more deeply than ever before. In moments, the human experience of reality is extended, explored, deepened, challenged, transformed. Between the aliveness, the solidity of one's experience, and the quality of the moments one experiences there is surely some correlation.

Moments lie at the heart of the literary experience, constituting a primary source of the excitement of drama, the central focus of any good modern poem, the source of the crisis of any substantial fictional character. Moments also have to do with the processes of judgment, decision-making, and conversion that are so critical a part of the theological enterprise. It is in historical moments that great leaders rise and that events are turned in one direction or another. Sports exist to create moments, those rare times when a player's physical resources, his mental state, and a particular crisis in the action and the rules all mesh perfectly. Social relationships bring us to moments, as do holidays, ceremonies, and rituals; and the more dramatic theories of personality (Jung, Maslow, Erikson) envision human life as a series of often highly dramatic moments to be lived through.

The short stories of the late Paul Goodman add yet another dimension to this topic, an interest that is heightened and developed by Goodman's involvement in the preparation of a well-known handbook on Gestalt psychology. For the moment does, indeed, have all kinds of relevance to the arts of healing the mind and spirit, and some of these relationships I shall

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attempt to spell out here. The connection springs from the fact that the mo-
ment stands in a very special relationship to our perception of reality, healthy-
mindedness being (in some sense anyway) a product of a grasp of reality that is
productive for the individual holding it and capable of bearing up under ex-
ternal scrutiny.

One of Goodman's stories, "The Ceremonial," is laid at some distant time in
the future, when the shams of commercialism have finally been uncovered. As
the story gets underway, a group of sensitive spirits, young and old, meet to
tear down the last remaining billboard. A quartet plays Beethoven, there are
poetry-readings and games, and the "moment" comes when all the diverse
spirits sense together the marvelous spirit of the day, "social peace and easy
subtlety . . . mutual acceptance . . . the coupling of fastidiousness and love."2
The separate goals of many have been joined in a common goal, and the falsity
of the billboard's message has been replaced by the reality of a circle and the
elegant Euclidean formula for this geometrical device. In "Jeremy Owen," the
owner of a small Midwestern café, bored with his work, goes to New York fora
holiday and is bored there too, by the dead, flat dullness he encounters
everywhere, until one day he catches sight of a young Puerto Rican lad seizing
a broken bicycle and dragging it off to fix it: the boy wants the bicycle. Jeremy
has watched desire bloom and flourish, and the boy's desire has, for a moment
at least, brought the visitor into contact with what is unfeignedly real. And in
yet another story, "A Prayer for Dew," the atmosphere of a New York
synagogue is described as tawdry, cynical, commercialized—the secular world
has intruded and nothing seems right for worship, until the congregation sings
together the great traditional Hebrew prayer for rain, and the spiritual power
surges once again through the faithful.

In each case (and the same point could be made with any number of
Goodman's stories), individuals struggle with a situation that is incomplete,
unfulfilling, gloomy until, as a result of some surprising confluence of events,
they move out into a brighter and livelier space, into a reality that is
sustaining and nurturing, challenging, suffused with life, meaning, and
possibility. In each case, a tiny event has enabled certain individuals to move
from an image of reality that was unproductive, destructive, to an experience
of reality that is healing, lively, capable of "public validation."5 Not only were
individuals sensing what they were "up against"; they were also becoming
aware of what resources they had, what might be made of a situation. And
why just a moment? Emily Dickinson draws an analogy with lightning, which

Exhibits sheets of place
Not yet suspected but for the flash
and bolt and suddenness.4

In other words, the starkness, the emotional intensity, which are charac-
teristic of many moments strip off whatever gets in the way of perception,
uncover the reality of a situation both drastically and convincingly.

A familiar Sufi tale puts the issue neatly. Two men differ over what to do
with their shoes as they enter a mosque. One leaves his carefully outside,