

Sunday, October 14, 2007

**Be here now / The hugging culture**

Â Â Â OftenÂ I blog about battling powerfully as a trial lawyer by being in the present. Â My path to sufficiently valuing and practicing being here now took many years and many mis-steps. I did not start consciously focusing on being in the present until the age of seventeen,Â when I read and tried to apply Herbert Benson's Relaxation ResponseÂ to try to help me be more relaxed when I often was the opposite. Two years later, I experienced Count Basie live, including his very deliberate being in the now.Â I then became interested in t'ai chi four years later, when I saw a character in Peter Wang's A Great WallÂ perform daily t'ai chi and expel flatus as a climax (apparently a way of expelling negative elements in the body, but fortunately my form of t'ai chi omits the flatus, perhaps particularly seeing that classes are held indoors), and took up the practice eight years later (as I describe here the long delay in getting started), ultimately learning of t'ai chi's focus on being here now and applying it twenty-four hours a day. Â T'ai chi apparently is heavily influenced by taoism. A year after I started practicing t'ai chi, I read The Tao of Pooh and The Te of Piglet, both by Benjamin Hoff (who apparently has given up on working with book publishers). The books helped enhance my t'ai chi teacher Len Kennedy's teaching to accept and work with change, rather than fighting it.Â Eight years later, in 2003,Â I heard and met Ram Dass, when he spoke in Washington, D.C. By then, he had left the depression of his stroke and saw it as Fierce Grace. When I finally met Ram Dass, standing patiently in line to do so after his talk, I saw how much in the now he was, and is. I finally bought and read Ram Dass's essentialÂ Be Here NowÂ within a few days.Â Ram Dass was certainly not in the now when he was still RichardÂ Alpert -- recently booted out of Harvard for having teamed with Timothy Leary to conduct psychological experiments with then-legal LSD --Â during the first days he spent with Bhagavan Das, who let Ram Dass know that Bhagavan had no interest in where Ram Dass came from, nor his credentials. Learning from them, t'ai chi, and the likes of Count Basie, my favorite letter in the alphabet became "Bee", for Be Here Now. Â Two years later, in Philadelphia, I met Bhagavan DasÂ ,Â who perhaps sensed I was not being here now at the time; otherwise,Â why was I carrying his book It's Here NowÂ (Are You?) -- which was already several years old and therefore removed from the nowÂ -- clearly for the possibility he would sign it. So he kept himself elusive to me, and it took two years for me to recognize that this was his lesson for me to get back to the now, and a reminder of a central theme of It's Here Now, which is that we do not need to travel far distances to find our teachers. Â A year later, my son was born. He is now nineteen months. He has not read the Relaxation Response, heard Count Basie, read The Tao of Pooh or The Te of Piglet, read Be Here NowÂ , nor read It's Here Now. Nevertheless, heÂ lives very much in the moment, exemplifying the practice of being here now. He has no schedule, does not wonder about the future, and simply does not worry. Recently, we went together to the national zoo (yes, captive animals and all; for him it is a wonderland). I pretty much let him go where he wanted and for as long as he wished. Curiously as much as he loves the zoo, one of his happiest moments during that visit was just to sit on the curb alongside the main walking path, playing with some leaves, and experiencing the animals around him -- both the human and non-human sort. Â Aren't most nineteen-month-old children like that (unless they experience or witness abuse -- which would be the topic for thousands of pages of discussion)? What makes most of them lose touch with such inner joy, magic and strength as they get older, to the point that authors, publishers, and therapists rake in huge sums of money to try to get them back to what they already knew and felt as such young children? Jon Katz.Â Â ADDENDUM: Perhaps young children start losing their being in the now as they start feeling more stress and disconnect; meet other children and adults who act cold, mean, intolerant, and violent; struggle with boredom and try to break out from boredom; and deal with the stresses of school when little attention is paid to teaching how to keep exams and everything else in life in balance and harmony. I am sure that thousands of pages have been written about this. I add the following. Â It appears common that as children grow older, at least in American society, they are hugged less frequently and are discouraged from hugging as much. Babies love being hugged, cuddled, and massaged. As they get older, they might think it less cool to be cuddled, and their parents might think they are smothering too much to cuddle as much. In the process, many children probably start feeling disconnect. As I look back on the many cold experiences I had in starting new schools,Â my first full-time job out of college, and various other new experiences, I re-feel the strong disconnect I felt. Warmth seemed too much missing; hugs were not necessary for that, just the warmth. It took me a long while to get and expressÂ more warmth in me, too; I was too busy keeping up my guard against real and imagined conflicts and adversaries ahead. Â At the Trial Lawyers College, hugging was the theme of the day, and remains so. Plenty of participants were into it; but I at first felt some coercion into it, lest I feel banished from the tribe while still in the middle of nowhere for four weeks. Before entering the Trial Lawyers College, I laughed my head off at a sitcom recreating a men's wilderness retreat, with the protagonist in the middle of the circle wailing out his woes as the drum beat methodically,Â and then begging for a hug, which he received in multiples. I heard the stories of sexual harassment lawsuits that included complaints about incessant requests from bosses for hugs. (Then again, a very skilled and caring plaintiff's discrimination lawyer was one of the first TLC attendees to ask me for a hug, which I declined at first still thinking the whole hugging culture bizarre (unless among family members, close friends, or those attracted to each other); she told me that I left her feeling very

unhugged.) I write a little about the TLC hugging culture here and here. Â I ultimately learned that just about everybody who offered me a hug at the TLC -- aside from the few who did it just to conform to the tribe -- did it with genuine intentions to connect, to give comfort, and to shed their protective armor. Â If people are not going to receive and give literal hugs, then at least figurative hugs are in order, starting with sharing warmth rather than coldness, shedding our protective armor more often, and being empathetic. That certainly would make the world a better place.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:01