



Substituting Presence for Preparation, by Patricia Ryan Madson

Give up planning. Clear your mind instead of filling it. Don't spend your energy on preparing for the future. Redirect it to the present moment. Instead of packing, show up empty-handed but alert, cheerful, and ready to receive unexpected gifts. Change the habit of getting ready for life in favor of getting on with it now.

We often substitute planning, ruminating, or list-making instead of actually doing something about our dreams. Hence the Boy Scout model, the insurance industry, and the world of to-do-list software. The habit of excessive planning impedes our ability to see what is actually in front of us. The mind that is occupied is missing the present.

No one is suggesting that open-heart surgery should be improvised. I want a surgeon who has performed the procedure before, studied the method and succeeded a number of times. However, if my operation is not going according to formula I certainly hope that my doctor is a good improviser. I hope that she can look with fresh eyes at what needs to be done.

Experiments in social psychology have confirmed that we don't listen very well when we are going to be called on. Most participants have no memory of those who introduced themselves just before or just after them. We are either preparing our own remarks or judging how well we did. Everyone does this to some extent -- thinking ahead when we ought to be listening.

To improvise, it is essential, that we use the present moment effectively. An instant of distraction -- searching for a witty line, for example -- robs us of our investment in what is actually happening. We need to know everything about This moment.

Instead of preparing an outcome, ready yourself for whatever may come. Substitute attention for preparation. Then you'll be working in real time. Focusing attention in the present puts you in touch with a kind of natural wisdom. When you enter the moment with heightened awareness, what you need to do becomes obvious. You discover that you already have the answers. Each of us is full of images, words, solutions, advice, and stories. Trust your imagination. Trust your mind. Allow yourself to be surprised.

-- Patricia Ryan Madson

