

# **The Power of Tomorrow**

**By**

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I greatly enjoyed reading Eckhart Tolle's 1997 bestseller, *The Power of Now*. Perhaps his main point is best summarized in the following sentence: "Nothing ever happened in the past; it happened in the Now. Nothing will ever happen in the future; it will happen Now."<sup>1</sup> This statement seems indisputable. Time, as we experience it, is always in this moment. When we experienced the past, it also happened in the now. And when the future arrives, it too will be now. When we fret too much over the past, over our mistakes, things we wished would have happened differently or not at all, *now* can be overwhelmed with regret. Worrying too much about a future that hasn't come, struggling to make things turn out just the way we want them, even though they seldom do, may only lead to disappointment and missing out on what's happening right now.

There's also much in the *The Power of Now* I don't care for, but for the past 22 years it's been like a little angel on my shoulder, or maybe a devil, reminding me to stop and smell the roses and not obsess over a past I cannot change or worry about a future I can't control. It's a bit like Stoicism, the 2,300-year-old Greek and Roman philosophy that also places a lot of emphasis on paying attention to the things we have some power over, instead of wasting all our energy on things we can't control. Back then, stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote, "Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power."<sup>2</sup> Or, as stoic author William Irvine writes, "There are things over which we have complete control, things over which we have no control at all, and things over which we have some but not complete control."<sup>3</sup> Putting it this way, it seems odd that most of us spend our time worrying about the things we have no control over, or the things we already have complete control over, instead of concentrating on the few things we have some control over and might actually be able to influence.

But even as I read Tolle's book, I didn't wholly buy into his basic premise, that the only moment is *Now*. As intuitively true as this might seem, Einstein's special theory of relativity gives us pause to consider the relative nature of time, which makes some physicists take the possibility of time travel seriously. Just as we know our species can only perceive what's between 400 and 700 nanometers of the electromagnetic spectrum, which means we're blind to ultraviolet or infrared light, our perception may also be limited by our ability to only perceive one moment of time.

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<sup>1</sup> Tolle, Eckhart, *The Power of Now*, New World Library, Novato, CA, 1999, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. 468.

<sup>3</sup> Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 89.

There's a character in the graphic novel *Watchmen* who is able to perceive the past, present, and future all at once due to an accident that's altered his quantum state. It's just science fiction, but Doctor Manhattan, as he's named, is a good philosophical thought experiment requiring us to consider the real possibility that the relative nature of time could make it possible to experience time differently under the right circumstances or with the right technology. If we weren't constrained by our limited perceptions, we might be able to experience alternate timelines, the same way we've developed technologies to block harmful UV light, or to make use of infrared remote controls, even though both are beyond our normal power to perceive. It could be the past and future overlap with the present and they all influence each other, even if we can't see how any more than we can see the infrared beam we use to control our TVs.

Quantum physics aside, it's easy to understand how the past and future impact us right now. There are some who have been so traumatized by the past that the present is always disturbed by it. PTSD is an extreme example, which makes it difficult for some to distinguish the present from the past. A lot of people wisely go to therapy to help them deal with the past, or, at least, to help them get along better in life despite the past. But it's not just the bad stuff that stays with us, thank goodness. All of the valuable things we've learned, the values instilled in us, our knowledge, the friendships we maintain, our families, our mentors, the gratitude and happiness we experience, the things we enjoy, our fondest memories, our most cherished possessions, the careers we have, are all anchored in the past.

Many of the best things in our lives are also anchored in the futures we imagine for ourselves. We pursue certain educations, training, careers, friendships, and so forth, because of the kinds of lives we hope to have. And if it weren't for the fact that some of us worry about the future, about making life better and more just, it wouldn't be possible to ever make much progress or overcome some of our biggest challenges. We exercise now to be healthy tomorrow. We eat well today so we can live longer. We save and invest so our future is secure. There's much about the past and the future that influences what we do right now.

Today we're on the cusp of another new year, a bridge between the past and the future, during which we can reflect upon our past year's successes and regrets, and begin to consider what we might want to do differently in the coming months. There's a saying in Taoism that *dwelling in the past robs the present, but ignoring the past robs the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of the past.* That's a more profound way of saying we should learn from our pasts, so we don't end up repeating our mistakes.

That's really what the power of tomorrow is, the possibility of being better than both yesterday and today. It's where our hope lies. Hope never lies in the past. That's called regret. Nor does it focus on now. Now is already upon us. Now is what it is. If we want now to be any better than it is, the most we can do is adjust our attitude about it, and hope is good about that. Hope transports us a bit from the discomfort of now into a more promising

tomorrow. But the future is one of the few things stoicism permits us to concern ourselves with because we do have some, though not complete, control over it. If we had complete control over outcomes, we would never have to worry about anything. If we had no control over them, then we'd either be chronically anxious, despondent, and hopeless. But we can set goals for ourselves and strive to accomplish them. We make New Year resolutions and work to keep them so that next year might be a little better for us than last year.

That's the trick about planning for the future—striking the right balance. Thinking we can completely control it, often leads to disappointment, unnecessary anxiety, and sometime to unethical behavior by trying to control what others do, think, and say. If we don't do some planning, however, like choosing the best route to take on a trip, or predetermining where we'll stay, we may get lost along the way, or find out all the hotels are booked because of some event we didn't know about. When it comes to the future, we need the wisdom to know the difference between what we can and can't control. We need to remember we have some but not complete control.

The historical Jesus seems to have been one of those individuals who didn't concern himself much about the future, not because he felt hopeless or powerless, but because he trusted he'd be fine wherever he ended up. "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."<sup>4</sup> This is kind of like saying *don't sweat the small stuff*, which makes a lot of sense when it comes to worrying unnecessarily, but today there's a lot of stuff we should be worrying about: like whose going to be the next leader of the free world? Is there still such a thing as the free world? This question alone makes 2020 an especially worrisome year. Global warming. Mass shootings. Nazis marching in our streets. White nationalists plastering black churches and synagogues with threatening hate speech. Meanwhile, some of us are so worried about just getting by that there's no time to consider a bigger picture. Just making ends meet, having affordable healthcare, paying for college, and keeping a roof over our heads are the looming concerns occupying almost all our attention. The ways of ravens and lilies are no longer metaphors that work to reassure us tomorrow is going to be okay. If the future is going to be better than today, then we have to be concerned enough to try our best to influence it.

One of the bestselling books I read in 2019 is MIT physicist Max Tegmark's book, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. That's another thing a lot of people are worrying about today, as they should be. There probably aren't going to be any Terminators in our future, but it appears inevitable that AI is going to replace a lot of the jobs humans currently need to make a living. "Jobs that involve highly repetitive and structural actions in a predictable setting aren't likely to last long before getting automated away," Tegmark says. "Computers and industrial robots took over the simplest such jobs long ago, and improving

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<sup>4</sup> See Luke 12:13-34.

technology is in the process of eliminating many more, from telemarketers to warehouse workers, cashiers, train operators, bakers and line cooks. Drivers of trucks, buses, taxis and Uber/Lyft cars are likely to follow soon.”<sup>5</sup> There are nearly 9-million workers employed in the truck driving industry alone. According to a 2017 report, *Goldman Sachs* predicts autonomous vehicle sales will represent 25 percent of the market by 2025, just five years from now.<sup>6</sup>

Just a few years ago most of us considered Artificial Intelligence a pipe dream that would happen way off in the future, if ever at all. Now it’s being used each day and is exponentially improving. There will come a time in the next few years, by which I mean two to five, when a doctor who doesn’t use it to help make diagnoses could be accused of malpractice, and not much longer before we’ll have medical AI apps on our phones that don’t require a doctor at all. In light of Moore’s law, which predicts computer power doubles every year, we’re on course to have AI with human level intelligence by 2033, and AI that exceeds it just a few years later.

That’s frightening to a lot of people, causing many of them to ask if we should prevent AI from further evolving. But I think that’s the wrong question. It’s wrong because it’s one of those things we can’t control. Superhuman AI is on its way, whether its created at home by a 14-year-old genius, a sinister dictator who wants to use it to rule the world, or a group of brilliant programmers committed to using it for human welfare. Tegmark says, “This means that we should be imagining positive futures not only for ourselves, but also for society and for humanity itself.” It’s not about turning back the clock or completely controlling the future. The question, rather, as Tegmark puts it, is considering “what sort of future you *want* rather than merely what sort of future you *fear*, so that we can find shared goals to plan and work for.”<sup>7</sup>

I bring this up now, not because I want to add Artificial Intelligence to your list of things to worry about, but to point out this is the same question we should be asking about everything in our future that we may have some influence over. *What sort of future do you want that differs from the sort of future you fear?* What can you do to potentially influence outcomes? But the question isn’t only what *can* you do, but also what *should* you do and *how* do you go about doing it? Exerting our influence over the future has an ethical dimension. That’s something Mitch McConnell needs to understand. Outcomes are important, but no more so than the means by which we go about making them happen. Influencing the future by controlling others right now, restricting their freedoms, whether through gerrymandering and voter suppression, breaking the laws just because you’re the fox in the henhouse and

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<sup>5</sup> Tegmark, Max, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY, 2017, p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> “Self-driving cars could cost America’s professional drivers up to 25,000 jobs a month, Goldman Sachs says,” Published Monday, May 22 2017 2:45 PM EDT, Updated Mon, May 22 2017 7:57 PM EDT. By [Anita Balakrishnan@MsABalakrishnan](mailto:AnitaBalakrishnan@MsABalakrishnan)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

can get away it, or by using social pressures and technologies to control what other people think and say, are never justified by future outcomes. The future is rooted in the past. It is an extension of now and will always end up mirroring the means by which we achieve our ends. A future born of oppression and suppression will remain oppressive and suppressive, no matter our good intentions.

So we don't really need a time machine or be involved in an atomic accident to experience how the past, present, and future coalesce. *Dwelling in the past robs the present, but ignoring the past robs the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of the past.* We are beings with both a past and a future. Even if we are mostly aware of the present, the past has influenced who we are right now, just as what we do right now will help determine who we become. Now includes past and future. I hope, as we consider what we might do differently in the coming months, we'll work to change the things we can change and should change, rather than concentrating on the things we can't or shouldn't control.

The New Year is a time for reflection and a time for hope. It's a time to consider what habits we should let go of, and which new habits we should begin. It's a time to further commit to the causes we most care about, and to being the change we wish to see. It's a time to risk failure because we do have some control and are obligated to try. That's the power of tomorrow. It reaches backward into this moment to guide us forward, calling us to seek it out, to make it real by making it present. The past is here too, reminding us of what does and doesn't work along the journey. As Søren Kierkegaard famously said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Or, as Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." I hope this year, you'll consider this question of the future you *want* rather than the future you *fear*, and that you'll do what is in your power, the power of tomorrow, to make your beautiful dreams come true. Happy New Year.