Your Best Life

Your Best Life: Tolstoy's *Three Questions* for Life

John D. Kelly IV MD

Leo Tolstoy's masterful short story, *Three Questions* [5] contains a powerful message for those who wish to attain a more

peaceful and meaningful life. First published in 1885, the short story recounts the tale of a king who is doggedly determined to find the answer to three questions:

- (1) When is the right time for every action?
- (2) Who are the right people to listen to?
- (3) What is the most important thing to do? [5]

Convinced that he would succeed in any endeavor if he possessed the answers to these three questions, the king sought the advice from the most educated in his kingdom. After hearing only disappointing answers, the king decided to approach a reclusive hermit, widely known for his wisdom.

The king donned plain clothes, dismissed his bodyguards some distance away, and met the wise man alone. He discovered a frail old man, digging a ditch in front of a modest hut in a wooded area.

The king proclaimed his three questions to the sage, who did not answer, but merely kept digging. Feeling compassion for the weak hermit, the king grabbed the shovel and relieved the old man of his laborious task. After hours of work and still silence from the hermit, the king

uttered, "I came to you, wise man, for an answer to my questions. If you can give me none, tell me so, and I will return home" [5].

At that moment, the king and the hermit spotted a man running towards them, clearly wounded in the abdomen from some form of penetrating trauma. The man collapsed at the king's feet. The king dressed the man's wounds and nursed him through the night in the hermit's hut. By morning, the wounded man revived and immediately begged for the king's forgiveness. Puzzled, the king questioned why the wounded man would beg for compassion. The man confessed that he was a sworn enemy of the kingdom, and was determined to assassinate the king following his meeting with the hermit. While hiding, the would-be assassin noted that the king delayed his return, forcing the assassin to emerge from his concealed place. The king's bodyguards recognized the assassin and gravely wounded him. He escaped the bodyguards, only to falter before the king and hermit.

Touched by the man's sincere confession, the king not only forgave his assailant, but made arrangements for his personal physicians to attend to him upon return to the kingdom.

A Note from the Editor-in-Chief:

I am pleased to present the next installment of "Your Best Life," a new quarterly column written by John D. Kelly, IV MD. Dr. Kelly is an Associate Professor of Clinical Orthopaedic Surgery at the University of Pennsylvania. His column explores the many ways that busy professionals—surgeons and scientists—might find peace, happiness, and balance both at work and in their personal lives.

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Before departing for his palace, the king asked his three questions one last time to the hermit. “You have already been answered” [5], the hermit replied.

The wise old man explained that had the king not stopped to help him dig, he most surely would have been attacked on his return by the assassin. “So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business” [5].

The time attending to the attacker’s wounds was paramount, as he was the most important person. Had the king not dressed his wounds, the infirmed enemy would have died without making peace with the king.

The wise man concluded by saying, “Remember that there is only one important time and that is now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person you are with, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making the person standing at your side happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life” [5].

When the hermit explained that now is the only time we have “dominion,” he affirms the truth—the past and the future cannot be changed. The only time we have any real power is in the

present. Why be preoccupied with what already happened (guilt) or fearful of what is to come (anxiety)? Truly, the most important relationship you have is the person you are with now. Now is the only important time.

Tolstoy’s genius is in illustrating that when the king attended to the hermit and his assailant, he not only saved his own life, but the life of another. He captures the essence of established fundamentals for a resilient life—living in the moment and service to others [1, 4].

In a previous column [3], I described the virtues of mindfulness, or living in the moment. Mindfulness-based practices increase efficiency and reduces stress [7]. Focus, clarity, and the quality of everything we attend to improves when we immerse ourselves in what is now. Furthermore, when the background static in our minds is quieted, space is created for positive emotions. In truth, a mindfulness-based life is fertile ground for happiness and well-being [6]. Additionally, one person’s happiness can positively affect others. Emotions can be contagious and one joyful individual can positively affect entire social networks [6].

When we give our total attention to those sent our way each moment, the quality of each encounter blooms. We give others affirmation and a sense of worth when we are fully attentive to

them. In essence, we convey the message, “you are worth my time” when we give attention to each word and expression that others convey to us. Mindful listening helps fortify friendships, marriages, and physician-patient relationships. When our patients feel we are listening to them, they are more likely to follow our suggestions, and more likely to be pleased with their visits.

Tolstoy stresses the importance of service to others and ensuring their happiness as “the pursuit of life.” He recognized that service provided its own rewards [6] and was life’s most noble calling. When we embrace a life of service and focus on the happiness of others, our ego vanishes. Our preoccupation with our own concerns evaporates, and time often stands still. We truly become immersed in the singular goal of easing the pain of another or bringing them some measure of happiness.

Indeed, in my experience, office hours flow more easily when I am invested in the well-being of my patients. Surgeries become much more fulfilling when I bring attention to all the good I am doing for my patients. My own marriage is at its best when I become more intentional to bring my wife, not me, more happiness. When the well-being of my fellow man or woman becomes my focus, energy manifests and I retire in the evening

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with a sense of peace no worldly possession has ever given me.

Tolstoy's *Three Questions* serves as a template for a meaningful life.

Tomorrow Try This

- (1) Give your undivided attention to every single activity you are engaged in. Recognize that multitasking diminishes the quality of every action.
- (2) Render your entire attention to whomever you encounter. Give each person all of you and observe the result.
- (3) Dedicate your day to others, and devote each action with the idea

of service in mind. Observe how your day will flow with less perceived effort.

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