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# Being Fulfilled

By **Regina V. Cates**

# Being Fulfilled



Contentment is defined: a state of happiness and satisfaction. Peace is defined: freedom from disturbance; quiet and tranquility.

At this time in life I can honestly say I am content and at peace. Yet, I was not always. There was a long period when I felt overwhelmed, like life was a race and I was struggling to keep pace with a group of fast runners. I moved from day to day as if in a fog, feeling disconnected. I imagine you have felt the same way. Maybe you feel that way now. You and I live in a time when we're pressed by obligations, society and others to always be on the go. Too often we frantically rush around desperate to check another item off our daily to do list. In today's fast-paced world it seems we are fixated on cramming so much into each day we're moving through life disconnected from the present moment. Disconnected from one another. Disconnected from the natural world. And, we're disconnected from our emotional, feeling heart.

Yet, I learned the contentment and peace we desire does not come from being disconnected from the present, each other, the natural world or our heart. Serenity and peace do not come from striving to do more and more.

Contentment comes from immersing ourselves in what we are doing in the moment at hand. Therefore, the solution to feeling disconnected in our often frantic, rat-race world is to slow down and engage ourselves with the present moment.

I know it sounds crazy to suggest by slowing down you'll actually get more done and have greater contentment doing what you do. But hang in here with me because by paying attention to what is most important, by learning to master and shift your attention to keep yourself focused in the present moment, you will not only get more done, you will also increase your satisfaction with life.

**"Contentment is one outcome of accepting multitasking doesn't work."**

We live in an attention-deficit world. We navigate within social and business environments where we are expected to experience life in nanosecond visual blips and sound bites. To keep up, fit in, or be seen as successful by the world, we buy into the assumption we can and should do more than one thing at a time. We believe it saves time. We believe we are

being efficient and productive. However, our quality of life resides in remaining present with personal interactions that occur in each moment.

I remember riding in the car with my sister when her children were young. My niece and nephew were in their car seats in the back, and they began hitting each other and crying. My sister calmly moved to the side of the road and stopped the car.

Her primary concern as the driver was to ensure our safety. Only after she purposefully kept us safe did she shift her attention to the children.

Each day we hear about accidents that happen as a result of texting, eating, talking on the phone, shaving, or tending to children or pets while driving. With all the things we think we must do in life, it is easy to believe we can and must do several things at once.

Yes, you and I can physically drive and talk on the phone at the same time; but we cannot be fully attentive to either undertaking. The first time we rear-end the car in front of us we learn we cannot successfully divide our attention. But why wait for an accident to teach us this lesson?

Yes, we are able to answer a phone call at work while writing an e-mail, but we cannot do both and remain fully present with either task. We push send while distracted and our boss gets something we intended for a friend. But why wait until we get called into her office and embarrassed to learn the lesson, we cannot pay complete attention to more than one thing at once?

Sure, we can physically sit in on a planning meeting and text at the same time; but it means we're not fully conscientious about either activity. Distracted we send an angry text to a friend. We regret it the second we push the button. Again, why learn the lesson the hard way?

Human beings CANNOT focus completely on two things at once. Our brain is not wired to do so. No, we cannot multitask no matter who says we can and no matter how much you and I believe we can. The fact is we cannot.

Did you know the term "multitasking" actually originated with computers? Our computer is able to download photos to a sharing site and run a

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virus scan while we check e-mail. The computer's processor seems to accomplish multiple tasks at once because of time-sharing. The computer is not actually doing more than a single thing at a time. In reality, it is rotating through several tasks many times a second.

We cannot switch tasks as a computer does. Research shows when we attempt to complete multiple tasks at once, or alternate rapidly between them, the incidence of error goes way up and it takes far longer to accomplish the job than if the tasks were done sequentially.

David E. Meyer, PhD, Director of the Brain, Cognition, and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan, investigated what happens to us when we attempt to multitask. In a study documented in *Psychological Review*, he found that rather than accomplishing more, we actually slow down significantly.

Dr. Meyer frequently tests Gen M (Generation Multitaskers) students in his lab, and he sees no exception for them, despite their mystique as master multitaskers. Study participants lost huge amounts of time moving between tasks, often adding upwards of 50 percent to completion time.

*The toll in terms of slowdown is extremely large—amazingly so. The bottom line is that you can't simultaneously be thinking about your tax return and reading an essay, just as you can't talk to yourself about two things at once. If a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing algebra, she'll suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if she just thought about algebra until she was done. People may think otherwise, but it's a myth. With such complicated tasks [you] will never, ever be able to overcome the inherent limitations in the brain for processing information during multitasking. It just can't be, any more than the best of all humans will ever be able to run a one-minute mile.*

The reality of our not being able to successfully divide our attention becomes crystal clear when we try. We have accidents and burn dinner. We leave our cell phone, wallet, or purse on the counter at the bank. We forget our child's piano recital. We do not listen to others carefully, or add instead of

subtract an entry in our checkbook. Most importantly, attempting to do many things at once causes us to become emotionally distanced from our heart, other people, and life.

The belief we need to do more than one thing at a time causes us to assume we have the capability to handle everything asked of us, and that this capacity has developed at a rate equal to our intellectual and technological growth. It has not.

**"Fulfillment comes from learning to manage life's distractions."**

While the speed and frequency of information and distractions multiply, our ability to process steadily growing amounts of information and stimuli remains unchanged. Appreciation of our attention as a finite personal resource is not new. Herbert A. Simon, PhD, an influential American social scientist of the twentieth century, noted:

*In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else; a scarcity of what it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.*

We are surrounded, at ever-increasing speed, by amazing innovations that allow interconnectedness on a global scale. Technology creates countless conveniences and wonders. But we cannot interact effectively or establish deep, honest relationships at the same fast pace. With so much demanding our attention, the likelihood is we will not consider input from our values, experience, and inner knowing. Without these to help guide us, the chance we will make decisions too rapidly increases.

When we think about it, we realize we are allowing ourselves to be convinced this is how life is supposed to be. It pays to remember what we concentrate on, we create. And, what we allow in does influence our mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Do you know Earth is constantly being hit by cosmic radiation? It is.

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Do you also know we are constantly being hit, too? We are.

While humans' impact on depleting the ozone layer is cause for worry, exposure to deadly levels of radiation is not going to happen in the immediate future. Of greater concern is we are being hit, in ways you may not realize, by countless advertisements, news programs, commentary, billboards, radio shows, and websites designed to capture our attention and influence us.

When we pay attention, we realize much of our exposure is negative or opinionated, condones reckless behavior, or promotes the pursuit of meaningless goals. Subtly and overtly, we are struck with untrue messages, such as:

- Sex is love.
- Dyeing our gray hair will automatically attract a much younger love interest.
- Money, fame, the latest technology, and a big home are the keys to fulfillment.
- People who regularly eat fast food look exactly like the models and actors starring in the commercials.
- Opinion is fact.
- What we do on a vacation of limitless temptation has no consequences.
- Life has an "easy" button.
- Beauty is being a size 0.
- Treating other people badly is necessary for success.
- Taking a pill or having elective surgery is the responsible solution for overeating, not exercising, neglecting our body, and depriving ourselves of sleep.

There is a saying, "We are what we eat." What we feed our body can nurture us. Or, eating without awareness can set us up for illness, excess weight gain, and stress. The same is true for what we feed our mind and heart.

We may view the onslaught with the cavalier attitude, "I can just tune it out," or "I am not influenced by it," or "It's just a movie or television show." Yet, scientific research points to how messages and experiences actually change our brain, both positively and negatively.

In *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Canadian psychiatrist Dr. Doidge advises we carefully select

what we listen to and the experiences in which we participate because:

*While the human brain has apparently underestimated itself, neuroplasticity (our brain's ability to establish new neural pathways in response to learning or through experience) isn't all good news; it renders our brains not only more resourceful but also more vulnerable to outside influences.*

As a young adult, when I listened to loud and rebellious music, I noticed it made me aggressive and disrespectful of others. Now I feel my energy being drained when the music coming from the vehicle next to me is so loud it vibrates my car.

A friend picked me up in her car. The radio was so loud I couldn't hear a word she was saying. I asked her to turn it down. She said, "Sorry, I did not notice."

We are becoming accustomed to too much noise. Constant or loud noises cause us to feel stressed and angry, and they cause us to detach from what is happening in the present, like my friend who did not notice her radio volume. We need to protect ourselves from excessive noise.

The same is true of our being impacted by steady streams of negative news and opinionated commentary. With the current news trend of having commentators reduce complex global issues to cynical, dualistic arguments, it is easy to develop an attitude that's apathetic and fearful of a gloomy world. There is a difference between responsibly staying informed and allowing ourselves to be swallowed up by negativity.

Someone I know became addicted to television court dramas—so much so she experienced frequent panic attacks and no longer found value in her daily life. Her relationships suffered, and she gained a tremendous amount of weight from eating while glued to the endless spectacle as it unfolded daily over the television.

Murder trials, civil suits, conflict, and other examples of corrupted and negative behavior have existed for centuries. What has not existed until the past few decades is our being constantly exposed, in graphic detail, to the horrible actions of the immoral and unconscious.

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To create a life of contentment and peace, we must determine how watching people treat each other badly can possibly support us in establishing mutually rewarding relationships. How does being constantly exposed to violence, sex, and financial and ethical misconduct contribute to our happiness, peace, and personal responsibility? How does being assaulted by steady pessimism allow us to create optimistic lives? How does continuously subjecting ourselves to violent video games promote peace, empathy, and understanding? How does reliance on the opinion of others allow us to make informed decisions based on fact and truth? How does listening to messages of blame, fear, hate, and divisiveness aid in our arriving at win-win solutions to the challenges we face as a human family?

To create a life of contentment and peace we must pay attention to what we expose ourselves to. We must remain mindful to not let ourselves be influenced by negative, unrealistic, and untrue ideas of what we should be, what our lives should look like, and what should make us happy.

We can start by questioning how the messages we are exposed to impact our worldview. Pay close attention to what is emotionally intrusive and what makes you physically uncomfortable. Notice your stress level when you are exposed to negative editorial commentary or are listening to loud, violent, or denigrating music, television, or video games.

Contentment and peace requires stepping into the role of responsible gatekeeper to what you allow in. Remember you are not intended to be a slave to technology. If you find yourself setting aside personal interactions and interpersonal communication in favor of gadgets, it means technology is no longer working for you, and perhaps you need to reassess your relationship with it. And if all else fails, there is always an off switch.

Satisfaction and joy come from creating deep, lasting relationships with ourselves and others. Accomplishing this requires developing the peaceful, purposeful presence that comes from controlling what we allow in and what we allow to distract us from what is happening in the moment. You and I can develop the patience and self-control necessary to manage technology and distractions.

We turn off the cell phone when sitting across the table from family and friends and immerse

ourselves fully in the conversation at hand. When the people in our lives want to share how their day was, we choose to turn off the television. We place more value on listening attentively and fully acknowledging their joy and excitement with life. When we drive, we choose to concentrate completely on the road and other drivers. We place greater value on keeping ourselves and others safe by waiting for an appropriate time to text, eat, or talk on the phone.

To successfully navigate our attention-deficit world, we think about an axiom every carpenter values: Slow down to patiently measure twice and cut once. That means we concentrate fully on the most important task at hand. Single-tasking, or finishing what we are engaged with in the moment before moving on to the next item, actually allows us to speed up. Completing something right the first time we do it beats wasting time putting out fires that result from sloppiness or miscommunication.

**"Contentment and peace come from staying present in the now."**

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, peruse means "to examine or consider with attention and in detail." And dictionary.com says peruse means "to read through with thoroughness or care."

Have you thought about what a difference it would make to your peace and joy if you actually perused life rather than skimming through it?

One day, I asked myself this question. Stressed and hurried, I was disconnected from myself and life. Why was I constantly choosing to experience life as if I were a stone tossed out across a lake, touching down then skipping above the water, over and over? The moments when I was above the water, and not present, far outweighed the times I was immersed in whatever I was doing.

When I consciously slowed down, I became introspective. I asked myself, "Regina, if you are not devoted to patiently immersing yourself fully in the here and now, how is it possible for you to actually enjoy life? Where is the satisfaction in allowing your thoughts to fantasize about a future event, rather than staying present to listen closely to a friend? What joy do you receive from letting your thoughts return you to a past situation, instead of patiently remaining present to thoroughly read and com-

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prehend an e-mail from a relative? Why waste time wanting a traffic jam to be different?”

The past is no longer a real moment in time we can influence or change. The past only holds memories of our life as it was. Returning to fond memories brings us great joy, but the past officially ended the instant we stepped from then into now.

We cannot go back in time to change the choices we made. Reflecting on the past and our previous choices is the way we learn. Allowing our mind to dwell on what we think should have, would have, or could have been takes our attention away from the present. Only in the present is it possible to apply what we learned from the past and create a better outcome for the moment that is now.

The same is true of the future. Regardless of how badly we may want the future to come, we cannot rush ahead and live in a time that does not yet exist. The future is not real; it is only the next moment's present, over and over, infinitely.

Permitting our mind to race ahead and attach itself to worries of what may happen disconnects us from the present, the only time possible to purposefully get ready for a future event. Living a fulfilled life requires us to patiently surrender to the truth: Life is only real now.

You and I have a conscious choice to make. We can live disconnected from the present while convincing ourselves we are actually plugged in, or we can slow down, remain patient, and focus our attention on immersing ourselves in the moment at hand. One truth is, there is something wonderful hidden in every moment of life. Another truth is, our contentment comes from slowing down to find it.

Stop and think about this with me. The only time you and I feel genuine contentment is when we are emotionally present in moment. The now moment is the only time we feel connected and plugged in, to life, other people, nature, and to our heart. So, you and I cannot have the quality life we want by skimming through. We cannot create fulfillment by not paying attention to what we need to focus on in the moment. Distracted is not present with what is most important, what is happening right here, right now in front of us. The solution is to make ourselves slow down to be purposeful.

Remember the story we were told as children about the race between the tortoise and the hare. The rabbit ran all over the place, wild and crazy. He made fun of the turtle because she moved so slowly, so purposefully, so peacefully. But in the end the deliberate turtle won the race. Why? Because she kept moving toward her goal, purposefully putting one step in front of the other, not allowing herself to be distracted.

The tortoise peacefully, patiently, purposefully remained present in the moment with what she was doing. She enjoyed each step. In the end she arrived at the goal a winner because she stayed focused on what was most important in each moment.

Now if the hare had stayed focused on each of his steps he would have blown past the finish line while the turtle was just getting started. But the hare chose to frantically skim through while the turtle chose to patiently peruse the race.

We live in a world where many of us seem less concerned with each step and more focused on the end result. But choosing to race through life causes us to miss out on the journey, the interactions, and the everyday meaningful moments of life.

I believe you will agree the stress you and I experience comes from skimming through life. Anxiety is a result of feeling disconnected from what is most important in this moment. Tension comes from already having one foot in the next moment before we've had a chance to emotionally feel the impact of the present moment. Rushing around is not a peaceful existence. But we are the ones who have convinced ourselves this is how life should be, must be for us to be successful and to keep up.

What or who are we attempting to keep up with? Where are we headed in such a hurry? Why are we skimming through life instead of immersing ourselves in the moment?

We've been told this is how life should be, must be. However, fulfillment comes from accepting the truth that we are busy chasing after a myth we cannot achieve.

We live in a world where we are told we CAN and MUST multitask in order to keep up, in order to be successful and get everything done. Yet, we're failing because we're sacrificing our relationships, with

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ourselves, our children, our friends, our family, our pets and parents. We are exchanging peace and fulfillment in an attempt to achieve the impossible. The hare lost the race because he was rushing around not paying attention to what was most important in the moment – steadily putting one step in front of the other to win. Contentment and peace come from appreciating life is in the details. We won't get bored by going slower, to peruse the experiences we have in life. Boredom is not solved by doing more but by putting more of ourselves into what we're doing.

To slow down we have to accept the truth we cannot remain focused on more than one thing at a time. I know this goes against what we are being told we can and must do. Remember, simply because someone believes something does not make it true, real or possible.

To have the best quality of life we steadily do our best in everything we do or else it is not worth doing, right? No matter how mundane we think a task is, satisfaction comes from being present with what we are doing, which requires focusing on what is most important in the moment. And to keep ourselves present requires us to overrule what society thinks, what others think, and what we have even told ourselves to believe. We throw out the multitasking myth and accept the fact we are not more efficient or productive when we attempt to do more than one thing at a time.

For instance, chopping vegetables for dinner is not an exciting activity. But there is a deep peace in being present with whatever we are doing because focused in the now moment causes us to be one with life and emotionally present with the people we care for.

Sure we can physically talk on the phone with a friend while chopping those vegetables. But the truth is we are not fully present with either chopping vegetables or the person we care about. Therefore, we must intentionally choose to be completely emotionally present with our friend because we place greatest value on our relationships.

Again, I am not saying you cannot perform both tasks at once. I am saying you cannot be fully emotionally present with both at the same time. Yet, the quality of life you want – contentment and peace – comes from being emotionally present

by choosing which task is most important in the moment.

Let's say you're chopping vegetables and the phone rings. You don't really have time to engage in a conversation and get dinner on the table. So stop chopping the vegetables, stay present and focus completely on your friend for the moment it takes to make a date to talk later. Then go back to the task you were doing before the phone rang. Shift your attention and take your heart with you because when you are distracted your emotions are not with you or your friend.

Satisfaction and joy come from creating deep, lasting relationships with ourselves and others. Accomplishing this requires developing the peaceful, purposeful presence found in slowing down to stay present with what is most important in the moment. As a bonus, you will save time because you don't have to go back and clean up the messes created when you are not paying attention.

Now, when your mind says this slowing down to be fully present is a huge waste of time tell the mind to mind its own business. You do not feel life with your mind. You only feel with your heart. And only when you are present and focusing your attention is your heart right there with you, wide open and fully attentive.

Be the tortoise and slow down. I promise it really works. Present you will be connected to those you love. You will feel life deeply. And you will accomplish more by being purposeful than you do rushing around like the frantic hare.

Go ahead. Slow down and focus your attention. Practice, practice, practice because with practice you will train your heart to stay connected. Connected to the now moment you will feel fulfilled. I promise once you've experienced being connected to even the little things in life you will become addicted in a very good way to immersing yourself completely in what is happening in the present - where true contentment, peace, and fulfillment reside.

Regina