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What Suffering Does

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Over the past few weeks, I've found myself in a bunch of conversations in which the unspoken assumption was that the main goal of life is to maximize happiness. That's normal. When people plan for the future, they often talk about all the good times and good experiences they hope to have. We live in a culture awash in talk about happiness. In one three-month period last year, more than 1,000 books were released on Amazon on that subject.

But notice this phenomenon. When people remember the past, they don't only talk about happiness. It is often the ordeals that seem most significant. People shoot for happiness but feel formed through suffering.

Now, of course, it should be said that there is nothing intrinsically ennobling about suffering. Just as failure is sometimes just failure (and not your path to becoming the next Steve Jobs) suffering is sometimes just destructive, to be exited as quickly as possible.

But some people are clearly ennobled by it. Think of the way Franklin Roosevelt came back deeper and more empathetic after being struck with polio. Often, physical or social suffering can give people an outsider's perspective, an attuned awareness of what other outsiders are enduring.

But the big thing that suffering does is it takes you outside of precisely that logic that the happiness mentality encourages. Happiness wants you to think about maximizing your benefits. Difficulty and suffering sends you on a different course.

First, suffering drags you deeper into yourself. The theologian Paul Tillich wrote that people who endure suffering are taken beneath the routines of life and

find they are not who they believed themselves to be. The agony involved in, say, composing a great piece of music or the grief of having lost a loved one smashes through what they thought was the bottom floor of their personality, revealing an area below, and then it smashes through that floor revealing another area.

Then, suffering gives people a more accurate sense of their own limitations, what they can control and cannot control. When people are thrust down into these deeper zones, they are forced to confront the fact they can't determine what goes on there. Try as they might, they just can't tell themselves to stop feeling pain, or to stop missing the one who has died or gone. And even when tranquillity begins to come back, or in those moments when grief eases, it is not clear where the relief comes from. The healing process, too, feels as though it's part of some natural or divine process beyond individual control.

People in this circumstance often have the sense that they are swept up in some larger providence. Abraham Lincoln suffered through the pain of conducting a civil war, and he came out of that with the Second Inaugural. He emerged with this sense that there were deep currents of agony and redemption sweeping not just through him but through the nation as a whole, and that he was just an instrument for transcendent tasks.

It's at this point that people in the midst of difficulty begin to feel a call. They are not masters of the situation, but neither are they helpless. They can't determine the course of their pain, but they can participate in responding to it. They often feel an overwhelming moral responsibility to respond well to it. People who seek this proper rejoinder to ordeal sense that they are at a deeper level than the level of happiness and individual utility. They don't say, "Well, I'm feeling a lot of pain over the loss of my child. I should try to balance my hedonic account by going to a lot of parties and whooping it up."

The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure. It's holiness. I don't even mean that in a purely religious sense. It means seeing life as a moral drama, placing the hard experiences in a moral context and trying to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred. Parents who've lost a child start foundations. Lincoln sacrificed himself for the Union. Prisoners in the concentration camp with psychologist Viktor Frankl rededicated themselves to living up to the hopes and expectations of their loved ones, even though those loved ones might themselves already be dead.

Recovering from suffering is not like recovering from a disease. Many people don't come out healed; they come out different. They crash through the logic of individual utility and behave paradoxically. Instead of recoiling from the sorts of loving commitments that almost always involve suffering, they throw themselves more deeply into them. Even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability. They hurl themselves deeper and gratefully into their art, loved ones and commitments.

The suffering involved in their tasks becomes a fearful gift and very different than that equal and other gift, happiness, conventionally defined.

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