

Transmute guilt into resolve

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A friend of mine came to me and said that he cares about his immediate friends, and he cares about humanity in the abstract, but he has trouble caring for most people. They seemed too shallow, too bitter, too spiteful to be worth an effort.

He'd been a sixth grade teacher, so I asked, "What about when they were eleven? Were they worth an effort then?"

"Yes," he answered adamantly. Or, most could still be salvaged at eleven, though there are some that you'd need to get to even earlier, if you wanted to save them from the shallowness and the learned helplessness and the death of curiosity.

"So then we live in a world that mishandles its youth, that turns them from bright children full of potential into empty shells. What are your feelings about that process, and the people subjected to it?"

His answer, more or less, was "A bit of anger, a bit of nothing-I-can-do-about-it, and a bit of victim-blaming, which I don't endorse."

Those last two emotions are very interesting: Why assure yourself that there is nothing you can do about the problem, if you don't care about the people who are harmed? Why assure yourself that it is their fault, if you stop caring about people once they are lost?

These seem like defense mechanisms, to me — defense mechanisms my friend generated unconsciously, because it was too painful look at bitter shallow adults and see lost mistreated eleven-year-olds.

Most of the time, if something is hurting you, I recommend making it stop. There is one exception, though.

Imagine walking past a beggar on the street. They're dirty and downtrodden; weathered but not much older than you. They ask you for change as you pass by.

This causes a certain type of pain in people — enough pain that most people develop some sort of coping mechanism. Some people pretend they didn't see or hear the beggar. Some give an apology, some make up an excuse about not having any money. Some shove their hands in their pockets and drag out some spare change, so that they may discharge their moral duty.

Other people cope with cynicism or bitterness — the sight of a beggar reminds them of the failings of the hated out group, the people who voted for the Wrong Political Party in the local elections. Still others cope with a wave of guilt, shorting out the pain, because the guilt seems easier to bear.

My suggestion, this week, is notice that impulse. Notice the impulse to look away, to ignore, to make an excuse, to assure yourself that there's nothing you can do, to blame the hated out-group.

Resist the impulse, and acknowledge the pain. Sit with the pain. Don't excuse yourself from it, don't tell yourself a story about how there's nothing you can do or about how your attention and effort can be better spent helping other people elsewhere. That may be true, but it's another coping mechanism, and it also shorts out the pain.

Instead, I suggest sitting with the pain, and transmuting it into resolve.

There are many people for whom guilt is the right response, when ignoring a beggar. If you're not doing anything to leave the world nicer than it was when you found it, if you're not doing anything to help your fellow human beings, if you're not doing anything to shape the grand story of Humanity as it plays out all around you, and if you *want* to

be helping, then guilt is a healthy reminder that you've betrayed some part of yourself.

This is why my "replacing guilt" series began by addressing the listless guilt, all those months ago. Sometimes, guilt is a reminder that you're not doing what you think is right, and those reminders can be valuable.

But most of the guilt-motivated people I know don't match that pattern. Many of them are dedicating their lives to making the world a better place, and they can do far more good by focusing their attention on their work and their health than they can by worrying over one beggar in the street, or over a thousand starving families that they can do nothing to save. They berate themselves for not needing less rest, for not being able to do the psychologically impossible, for not being as smart or as productive or as wealthy or as kind as those around them.

I say: Yes, the beggar suffers. Yes, a thousand families starve. The world is hurting.

And yes, there are others who are doing more than you to help. Some are smarter, some are more productive, some were born wealthier, some are kinder, some are less psychologically fragile, some have a stronger will.

But none of these are reasons for guilt. Guilt was made for us, not us for it. Guilt is useful only insofar as it helps you wrest yourself from the wrong path. If you're already walk-

ing the path you want to walk, if you're working on becoming kinder, or more generous, or psychologically stronger, or wealthier, or smarter, if you're already moving as fast as you can given your current constraints, then the fact that the world is still hurting and you aren't strong enough to fix things yet is no reason for guilt.

Rather, it's a reason for *anger*, at a world where nobody is evil but everything is broken. It's a reason for *resolve*, to push yourself as hard as is healthy and sustainable but no harder.

But it is not a reason for guilt, once you are doing what you can, in full light of the fact that you are still only mortal.

There are dozens of opportunities to transmute guilt, or awkwardness, or not-my-problem into resolve, each day.

Notice the disabused middle-aged woman who has to sacrifice a part of her soul working a job at Starbucks in order to earn her right to survive. See the madman yelling across the street, while everyone else reflexively struggles to ignore or unsee him. See a morbidly obese person avoid the stares of onlookers as they struggle with self-loathing in a civilization that filled its cheapest foods with poisons that ravage bodies.

Some people ignore these painful parts of the world. Others try to unsee them. Others try to distance themselves, by poking fun at those who are deemed "pathetic."

I suggest seeing them, and remembering. Remember that there may come a time when humanity will move the very stars to ensure that no mind suffers as much as a first-world beggar does today. Remember that, beneath all the mental callouses that allow you to write fellow human beings off as unsalvageable, the reason you won't help them is not because they aren't worth helping, but because there are too many other things that need doing first.

So notice your impulse towards guilt. Notice your impulse to ignore. Notice your impulse to distance yourself from people you don't want to acknowledge. Notice your impulse to assure yourself that it's not your fault, that there's nothing you can do, that you can't help them because it's cheaper to help other people suffering just as much abroad.

Then stop following those impulses. See the dark world. Acknowledge the pain, and remind yourself that we live in a universe *worth changing*.

Remind yourself that you're a part of the grand human story, and that when our children's children's children hear about the amount of suffering we had to pass over in combat of greater evils, they will shed tears.

The count of people we have to leave behind can be a persistent source of pain. But don't let it be a persistent source of *guilt*. Instead, let it be a reminder that the universe is vast and uncaring, and that our job here is unfinished.