

See the dark world

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Consider fictional Carol, who has convinced herself that she doesn't need to worry about the suffering of people who live far away. She works to improve her local community, and donates to her local church. She's a kind and loving woman, and she does her part, and (she reasons) that's all anyone can be expected to do.

Now consider fictional Dave, who failed a job interview. When telling his friends the story, he emphasizes how the interviewers were biased against him, and how they asked stupid questions.

Meanwhile, driven by hunger, a fox tries to reach some grapes hanging high on the vine but is unable to, although he leaps with all his strength. As he goes away, he remarks "Oh, you aren't even ripe yet! I don't need any sour grapes."

All of these reactions — and many others — share a common kernel. Carol, Dave, and the fox are all inventing reasons why an unpleasant state of affairs is acceptable.

They're not inventing reasons why the world is *good*, by any means; but they are putting forth cognitive effort to make it seem *tolerable*.

Carol would surely tell you that it's terrible that children are suffering abroad — but only after convincing herself that her duty to help them had been discharged.

The fox would tell you that the world is worse for being full of sour grapes — and yet, he still had to work hard to assure himself that he didn't live in a far worse world, where the grapes were both ripe and inaccessible.

There's a certain type of darkness in the world that most people simply cannot see. It's not the abstract darkness: people will readily acknowledge that the world is broken, and explain how and why the hated out-group is responsible. And that's exactly what I'm pointing at: upon seeing that the world is broken, people experience an impulse to explain the brokenness in a way that relieves the tension. When seeing that the world is broken, people *reflexively* feel a need to explain. Carol can acknowledge that there is suffering abroad, but this acknowledgement comes part and parcel with an explanation about why she bears no responsibility. Dave can acknowledge that he failed to pass the interview, but his mind automatically generates reasons why this is an acceptable state of affairs.

This is the type of darkness in the world that most people cannot see: they cannot see a world that is *unacceptable*. Upon noticing that the world is broken, they reflexively list reasons why it is still tolerable. Even cynicism, I think, can fill this role: I often read cynicism as an attempt to explain a world full of callous neglect and casual cruelty, in a framework that makes neglect and cruelty seem natural and expected (and therefore tolerable).

I call this reflexive response "tolerification," and if you watch for it, you can see it everywhere.

The sour grapes fallacy is a clear example of tolerification, but it's only one instance of the broader class. Tolerification occurs *any* time you see something bad in the world and feel an impulse to explain, especially if that explanation relieves pressure that would otherwise be placed on you.

Consider, for example, Alice and Bob in my allegory of the dragon. Both have recently learned that the market value of a life is only a few thousand dollars. Both are uncomfortable with this, and they reflexively tolerify the information in different ways.

Bob denies the information, protesting that one can't make decisions by attaching dollar values to lives, because lives are sacred. This declaration of a sacred value allows Bob to deny the discrepancy entirely, reject the implied responsibility, and restore tolerability to the universe.

Alice, by contrast, accepts the data and denies the intuition that lives are sacred. She notes that if you act like lives are worth *more* than a few thousand dollars then you'll save fewer lives than you could, and thus anyone who acts otherwise and wants to save lives is inconsistent. Therefore, she concludes that she can't treat the intrinsic value of a life as

worth any more than the market price, and grows cynical — not only are lives non-sacred, she realizes, but they're not worth that much more than a few thousand cans of coke. Now she can worry less about saving lives: they weren't worth as much as she thought, anyway. Tolerification successful.

Notice how their gazes slip to one side or the other, both of them failing to see the dark world — the one where lives are *both* nigh invaluable, *and* priced at \$3000. The one where it's *reprehensible* to pretend that a life is worth only as much as a few thousand cans of coke, *and* this is how you have to price a life if you want to save as many lives as you can. The world with a grim gap between life's price and life's value. This is the world that both Alice and Bob both reflexively tolerify away from.

In me, tolerification is toxic to intrinsic motivation. If you want intrinsic drive, I suggest you train yourself to notice when your gaze slips to one side or the other. When that happens, focus, and stare directly at the dark world.

Content note: the remainder of this post encourages you to contemplate and acknowledge significant difficulties in your own life. I assume that the reader is resilient in the face of adversity. If acknowledging adversity in your life is currently liable to harm you, consider skipping the rest of this post.

My favored tool for subverting the impulse to tolerify the intolerable (and thereby stare directly at the dark world) is to pose myself a "what if" question.

What if I lived in the world where it was *both* the case that lives are nigh invaluable, *and* it costs only a few thousand dollars to save a life?

What if I lived in the world where it was *both* the case that I failed the interview *and* it was because I lacked the requisite skill?

The default impulse, upon learning that I failed the interview, might be to tolerify. Someone prone to tolerification might automatically, reflexively, start listing ways that the interview was stacked against them, or reasons why the questions were stupid, or reasons why they didn't want the job anyway. Then they might jump directly into the next interview, with excuses already in hand for when they fail that one too. This illustrates one major way that tolerification can be harmful: it might prevent you from seeing what really needs to be done. The person who refuses to tolerify can seriously consider spending more time practicing, or switching careers. If necessary, they can acknowledge that they really need to get a job while still dramatically unqualified, and decide to play the numbers with full knowledge of what they're doing. If they tolerify, they have to act indignant when they fail. If they don't, they can face what needs to be done.

Refusing to tolerify in this situation can be *really really hard*. Saying "It seems I am not yet be skilled enough to get a job in this field" can be *tough*, especially when your livelihood depends upon the opposite being true (and double-especially if you think that past failures make you a "bad person").

The nice thing about the "what if" question is that I don't need to *believe* that that's the actual world when pondering the "what if". I don't need to *acknowledge* that I am unqualified for the job, I can simply ask what *would* do if I were. This makes it easier to plan out what I would do if I could see the dark world, and having a plan often makes it easier to acknowledge that the world I'm living in is dark. (See also: leaving.yourself a line of retreat.)

So, let's run through some what ifs.

What if we lived in the world where it was *both* the case that (a) unwanted pregnancies could ruin the lives of both mother and child *and* (c) unborn children were moral patients with a right to life? What would you do then?

What if we lived in the world where it was *both* the case that (a) people are living and dying in extreme poverty *and* (b) you really need a new car soon if you want to keep your job, but you could spare a few thousand dollars if you really had to. What would you do then?

What if we lived in the world where people do have souls, but they're implemented on brains made of meat that rots

when you die?

What if we lived in the world where evolution built conscious predators, and conscious prey that suffers as it gets eaten alive?

What if almost nobody was evil, but almost everything was broken anyway? What if the hated out-groups *aren't* responsible for all the suffering?

I'm not claiming that these what-ifs are accurate. Rather, I offer this as a tool for staring the dark world directly in the face. Imagine the world that is as bad as it might be. Imagine the world were full of intolerable injustices. What would you do then?

Can you look upon those dark worlds and feel a sense of despair, of the world being harder to fix than seems acceptable? Do you get a feeling of bracing yourself for making terrible tradeoffs, because there are too many problems and you can't handle all of them? If so, that's good: that's what it feels like, to see the dark world.

The question is, what would you do *then*?

I'm not here to offer answers. Maybe your answer is "well in that world I'd stop trying so hard and move to a cabin in the

woods and try to forget how screwed up everything was." Or maybe your answer is "in that case I'd rise to the challenge, no matter how terrible the odds." More likely, it's something else entirely. I'm not trying to feed you answers. I'm trying to help you refuse to tolerify, because there is a source of resolve that comes only when you see the dark world.

I have to believe this falsehood, because otherwise I would be unable to go on.

This is something that I hear fairly frequently, either to my face, or in popular media. "I have to believe in God; otherwise there would be no meaning in my life." Or "It's a good thing humans are unrealistically optimistic; we wouldn't be able to handle reality." Or "I have to believe that I'm going to get this job; otherwise I wouldn't be able to continue trying." Or,

"All right," said Susan. "I'm not stupid. You're saying humans need... fantasies to make life bearable."

REALLY? AS IF IT WAS SOME KIND OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little—"

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES.

"So we can believe the big ones?"

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

"They're not the same at all!"

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET—*Death waved a hand.* AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

"Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point—"

MY POINT EXACTLY.

— Terry Pratchett, *Hogfather*

People say they *need* to tolerify, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to handle the intolerable world.

But that's false. Acknowledging that the world is unacceptable will not kill you; the world is *already* as unacceptable as it is. Remember the litany of Gendlin.

So face the dark world. See the intolerable.

Take up the burden that is supposed to be unbearable. Don't excuse the world, don't come up with reasons why it's OK.

Let it be not OK.

What happens then? What do you feel then?

Is there a sense of despair or helplessness? Is there a sense of hot fury or cold resolve? Is there a sense of being tiny in the face of a problem that is large?

Live *there*, in the face of the intolerable. Don't struggle to make it acceptable, just live with the bad world, while buckling down rather than buckling.

It is there, while staring the dark world in the face, that I find a deep well of intrinsic drive. It is there that my resolve and determination come to *me*, rather than me having to go hunting for them.

I find it amusing that "we need lies because we can't bear the truth" is such a common refrain, given how much of my drive stems from my response to attempting to bear the truth.

I find that it's common for people to tell themselves that they need the lies in order to bear reality. In fact, I bet that many of you can think of one thing off the top of your heads that you're intentionally tolerifying, because the truth is too scary to even consider. (I've seen at least a dozen failed relationships dragged out for months and months due to this effect.)

I say, if you want the intrinsic drive, drop the illusion.

Refuse to tolerify. Face the facts that you feared you would not be able to handle. You are likely correct that they will be hard to bear, and you are likely correct that attempting to bear them will change you. But that change doesn't need to break you. It can also make you stronger, and fuel your resolve.

So see the dark world. See everything intolerable. Let the urge to tolerify it build, but don't relent. Just live there in the intolerable world, refusing to tolerate it. See whether you feel that growing, burning desire to *make the world be different*. Let parts of yourself harden. Let your resolve grow. It is here, in the face of the intolerable, that you will be able to tap into intrinsic motivation.