

The Light Was in the Darkness

Reflections on the Growth that Hides in the Pain of Suffering

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Quoting the Bible, a student of mine once said: “The light was in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” The wisdom embodied in these simple words often guide me when, in my work as a professor and practicing psychologist, I encounter people who are suffering what philosophers have called “existential stress.”

Existential stress is specific to humans because of the complex inner world we experience through the reach of human consciousness. Unlike other animals, we experience stress related to events that have never occurred and will never occur; we stress over the things that we have done or failed to do; and we stress over the kind of person that we have become or that we wish we were. It is, perhaps, this form of stress that the world’s spiritual traditions have sought, most deeply, to address. As a clinical psychologist I often meet people who are facing existential stress. Over the course of my career, I have come to appreciate more fully how the suffering that it gives rise to, while potentially devastating, also represents an opportunity for profound development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá¹, during His historic travels to the West from 1911 to 1913, spoke about this reality of the human condition:

The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply... so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment... Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most.

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Some years ago, a twenty-year-old Caucasian male, whom I will call Daniel, was brought to our outpatient clinic by his distressed parents because we handled cases of suffering that did not respond well to anti-depressive and mood-stabilizing medicines. For this reason, most of my patients were desperate and demoralized and some, like Daniel, were also acutely suicidal. During his first visit with me, Daniel said that he would, indeed, kill himself in two months, on his twenty-first birthday.

Among the many things that I learned from exploring his history was that Daniel suffered from poor impulse control. On several occasions, for example, he had completely destroyed his parents' home due to a sense of “uncontrollable” rage. And

although he had never physically hurt another person, Daniel often did things to inflict pain upon himself. One such thing was to “play chicken,” which consists of placing a lit cigarette in the bridge connecting two people's forearms; the first person to move his/her arm is designated the “chicken.” When Daniel arrived for his first session with me, he proudly displayed a rather severe self-inflicted burn from a couple of days earlier.

Although Daniel's cognitive and physical development was that of a mature adult, his emotional and social development was clearly delayed. When I first met him, Daniel continued to throw temper tantrums whenever he was frustrated and appeared to lack the self-analytical abilities that one would expect in a twenty-year-old. But these realities did not tell the whole story. In Daniel, I could also see glimmerings of mature thought, of resolve, and of hope. He had successfully completed a drug treatment program and had maintained sobriety for more than a year. His recent cosmetic surgery indicated a desire for self-improvement. And he attended every session with me—even though our meetings were scheduled early every morning, five of seven days a week. In short, Daniel was the kind of person that caused me to think there was, indeed, “light in the darkness.”

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The initial and most pressing goal of treatment was to assess Daniel's potential for suicide and to take any steps necessary to reduce this risk. I should add that I considered the possibility that Daniel's frequent suicide threats were attempts to control, manipulate, and hurt his parents. In a sense, he regarded his unhappy condition as *their* fault, and he wanted *them* to do something about fixing it. Nevertheless, given the prevalence of suicides among males his age, I took Daniel's suicide threats quite seriously.

I began my meetings with Daniel by sharing with him, quite openly, my hunch that one of the reasons he wanted to kill himself was that he did not like the person he had become and had little hope that he could be different. It seemed clear to me from his response that this observation resonated with him. As a result, I was very open about the goal of our sessions, which was to explore the possibility that, if he really wanted to, he could change his life in ways that mattered and become the kind of person who would deserve his own admiration and respect. Almost immediately I saw in Daniel a flash of optimism, a ray of light, that could be nurtured.

The insights I gained from our first sessions helped me to decide how to proceed. The theory of suicide I chose to work under was developed by social scientist Roy Baumeister. Baumeister's research suggests that, oftentimes, suicide does not derive from a desire to die but is animated by a longing to escape painful self-awareness.² Thus, people who do not like the person that they have become and who feel hopeless about the prospects of changing, or who simply have no idea about how they might go about the process of changing, are more likely to have thoughts of killing themselves. This is particularly true when other attempts to escape an undesirable self prove futile.

Before meeting Daniel, I had long felt that the great spiritual and philosophical traditions contain insights that could be of benefit in these conditions. The sacred texts from the world's great faiths teach us that enduring happiness is not an inevitable by-product of material conditions but is dependent upon the development and exercise of moral and spiritual capacities. In a well-known treatise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborated on this very point:

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.³

And Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, articulated the theory of “eudaimonism,” which posits that, beyond a healthy brain and body, human happiness is conditional upon moral behavior.⁴ In describing Aristotle's perspective, contemporary philosophers Jennifer and Michael Mulnix have written:

...eudaimonism holds that happiness consists in fully actualizing yourself or fulfilling your personal potential as a human person. Your potential is not limited only to your ability to experience pleasures and satisfactions, but also includes your ability to reason, to be morally virtuous, and to exercise autonomy, among other things. So there are things independent of your first-hand experience of life that can make your life go better and that are a part of your happiness, whether you recognize them or not and whether you value them or not. To be happy, then, is to live a complete life that lacks nothing of value – to flourish as a human person.⁵

Within this theoretical framework, I regarded Daniel's drug use as an earlier attempt not only to “enjoy himself” but also to reduce painful self-awareness. When the escape provided by drugs proved to be insufficiently gratifying, Daniel abandoned it and began to pursue other options, including suicide and grandiose attempts to demonstrate his worth—like engaging in the game of “chicken.”

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In the weeks that followed, Daniel and I explored what it might look like to strive to be noble. We asked ourselves what would be required of us if we wished to feel as though we were becoming the kind of human being who is worthy of respect. In our exploration of these themes, we examined a wide range of ideas. We drew insights from the Western science of psychology that has shown how habitual ways of thinking can prevent us from achieving happiness and from the Eastern traditions that tend to focus on the pursuit of self-knowledge and self-mastery as prerequisites for well-being.

From *The Analects*, a work of the Chinese sage, Confucius, for example, we reflected together on this:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the empire, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.⁶

What might it mean, we asked one another, to “illustrate illustrious virtue”; to “cultivate” one’s person; to “rectify one’s heart”; to be “sincere” in one’s thoughts; to “investigate” things?

In addition, we considered how our explorations might invite meditation on those aspects of our selves that are, like rare jewels, hidden from us, and thus require effort if they are to be brought forth—a concept conveyed in the following words of Bahá’u’lláh:

Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.⁷

What might be meant by the “sheath of self”? How does selfishness render the more beautiful aspects of ourselves dark and invisible? How can pursuing our whims and desires prevent us from manifesting the qualities that we long to embody? What, exactly, are the inner qualities that we find ourselves in search of?

Thus, the first step in changing ourselves, we noted to each other, is in acknowledging the areas in which we need to change. We discussed Daniel’s upbringing and how his parents’ generosity and permissiveness had enabled him to get away with behaviors that he should have long since outgrown; how his drug use had prevented him from feeling and processing the kinds of emotions that can serve as guides that facilitate the development of insight and self-knowledge; and how, although he had the body and capacities of an adult, he was still behaving somewhat like a child. Such behavior, we concluded, kept him in a constant state of inner turmoil and prevented him from developing a positive sense of self.

In order to reinforce the idea that he could change, together we constructed a self-report rating instrument that enabled Daniel to reflect upon himself along several important dimensions of life. We resolved that we would make effort every day to improve in each of the areas of growth that he had identified. We noted that life would provide opportunities for development each day by presenting us with moral, psychological, and spiritual challenges. When these challenges arose, we would, with resolve, meet them confidently and would endeavor to do what seemed to be the right thing, even if doing such a thing felt difficult or even impossible. Sometimes we would be successful, we noted, and other times not; what is important is not so much the outcome, but the sincerity of our effort. I told him that it would probably be very difficult at first, but that with practice, he would soon find himself gaining the power necessary to act in ways that he respected.

We explored some of the prayers that have been part of the spiritual heritage of humankind and that others have used over the ages to clarify their values and seek help from the unseen realm. From the Native American peoples, we called upon this prayer:

O Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the wind,
Whose breath gives life to all the world.
Hear me; I am small and weak.
I need your strength and wisdom.
Help me seek pure thoughts and act with the intention of
helping others.
Help me find compassion without empathy overwhelming me.

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother,
but to fight my greatest enemy - Myself..
Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and
straight eyes,
so when life fades, as the fading sunset,
my spirit may come to you
without shame.⁸

From the Buddhist tradition, we searched out inspiration in verses like this: “As Wind carries our prayers for Earth and All Life, may respect and love light our way. May our hearts be filled with compassion for others and for ourselves. May peace increase on Earth. May it begin with me.”⁹

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To further reinforce Daniel's belief in his ability to change, we drew upon the power of meditation. In a public talk in London in 1913, long before its many benefits were revealed by researchers in medicine and psychology, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá drew attention to the many benefits of meditation. He said:

... while you meditate you are speaking with your own spirit. In that state of mind you put certain questions to your spirit and the spirit answers: the light breaks forth and the reality is revealed...

The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation; through it affairs of which man knew nothing are unfolded before his view. Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food...Through the meditative faculty...colossal undertakings are carried out...¹⁰

I also often borrowed illuminating stories about those who had lived lives of excellence by overcoming some great difficulty, fault, or challenge. I engaged with him in breathing processes that helped him to metabolize anxiety and frustration and assisted him to develop a sense of himself that transcended his tendency to think of himself largely in bodily terms.

Finally, on the weekend before his birthday, I recounted to Daniel all the progress that had been made. I told him how proud I was of him but also how I feared that he might make a suicide attempt just to save face—especially because he had promised so many people for so long that he would do it. I told him that this was, perhaps, the ultimate test of his growing maturity, self-respect, and self-control. I closed the session by telling him the following story:

Many years ago, on an Indian reservation, there lived a young Caucasian boy who was known for his mistreatment and disrespect of Native Americans. Whenever he would encounter a Native American, he would make a special effort to embarrass them. One day, with malice in his heart, he went to see an old man who was known among the tribe as a wise elder. The young boy's desire was to show the elder that he was really a fool -- so he caught a bird, cupped it in his hands, and took it to the old man asking: “Old man, is the bird dead or alive?” The old man knew that if he said the bird was dead, the young boy would simply open his hands and let the bird go free; conversely, if the old man said that the

bird was alive, the young boy would squeeze it to death. The old man paused for a moment and gently noted: “Young man, the bird is in your hands.”

I said to Daniel that when a person passes through adolescence and comes of age, his life and destiny are largely in his own hands; he alone can decide the ultimate course and quality of that life.

The next Monday, on his birthday, Daniel did not show up for our session but called me from Florida to tell me that he was fine and that he had driven there to spend some time with his favorite aunt and to share with her how much he had been changing. Soon after, he returned and resumed his daily sessions with me. From that point onward, his progress was exceptional. Before he ended the program, he had gotten his own apartment and was going to work regularly. In addition, his depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation had completely disappeared. When I encountered him two years later while walking through the neighborhood grocery store, he introduced me to his wife and said, with a face wreathed in smiles, that they were preparing for their first child.

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Daniel’s effort to achieve greater levels of maturity was, of course, not over. As with all of us, his struggle would certainly extend across time and be manifested in a myriad ways. There are recognizable stages on this journey, and it appeared that Daniel had reached an important milestone. He was at least aware, for example, that existential suffering tends to have a cause, that the lessons embodied in such suffering can foster our development, and that this uniquely human form of suffering can be overcome as we bring our lives into conformity with universal principles and values. And while Daniel might have spoken about the work that we had been doing together in terms that are wholly secular, from the perspective of the Bahá’í teachings, no matter our beliefs, the greater the fidelity of our behavior to certain universal principles and values—such as love, forgiveness, service to humankind, humility, patience, and purity of heart—the greater the quality of our life and development.

Indeed, although the moral and spiritual truths that animate reality have been reiterated from age to age by the Founders of the world’s great religions, they are also truths that are being discovered empirically through the sciences of psychology, medicine, and public health. These principles, therefore, are not simply ideas that can be accepted or rejected according to human preferences; they are, rather, associated with powers that are as objective in their influence as the electromagnetic force, the gravitational pull of the planets, and the strong and weak nuclear forces of nature. One might hypothesize that as science and religion—the two most potent epistemic systems—are more deeply integrated in the search for knowledge and wisdom, our understanding of how these universal principles are manifested in the various dimensions of life will be enriched.

One might say, then, that Daniel’s early approach to life was one that did not take into consideration the possibility of growth and development. His attitude and behavior toward himself and his parents were animated by anger and hostility; by impatience and self-righteousness. Thus he behaved in ways that violated fundamental universal principles, undermining his development and inflicting upon himself and others suffering so severe that he could contemplate no remedy but death. As he began, however, to replace old patterns of behavior with a pattern that better

reflected his innate nobility, he began, quite naturally, to feel happier, more hopeful and content. In this way did Daniel begin to move out of darkness into light.

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Notes

1. The eldest Son of Bahá'u'lláh and Head of the Bahá'í Faith from 1892 to 1921. See <https://www.bahai.org/abdul-baha/>
2. Baumeister, R. (1991). Escaping the Self: Alcoholism, Spirituality, Masochism, and Other Flights from the Burden of Selfhood. New York: Basic Books.
3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*: www.bahai.org/r/006593911
4. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle wrote, "The good of man is the active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence and virtue."
5. J.W. Mulnix & M. J. Mulnix (2015). Happy Lives, Good Lives: A Philosophical Examination. Tonawanda, NY: Broadview Press.
6. Confucius, The Great Learning. The Four Books: The Chinese-English Bilingual Series of Chinese Classics, p. 3. (1992 Translation by Publisher) Hunan Publishing House.
7. From: *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 72., retrieved from: <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/HW/hw-145.html>
8. Anonymous Native American Indian prayer, retrieved from: https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/oh_great_spirit_whose_voice.html
9. Tibetan Wind Horse Prayer.
10. Address by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the Friends Meeting House, St. Martin's Lane, London, Sunday, January 12th, 1913, retrieved from: <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/ab/PT/pt-55.html>