

The Myth of Misery

By

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My friend Jack wrote me a letter this past week apologizing for something he said to me in 1984. He had re-discovered a letter from me (also from 1984) in which I was angry about a comment he had made. Apparently I had been very angry, because the letter was five pages long. In rethinking the comment, he wrote last week, he is afraid he was misunderstood. We were twenty-two and twenty-six at the time. Now we are forty and forty-four. He wants to set things straight, before another decade slips by.

There are three amazing things about his letter: the first is that I actually remember the conversation in question. It contributed to a change in the way I thought about, and later conducted, my life. The second is that, out of hundreds of letters that we exchanged and saved over a period of eighteen years, Jack's random reach into the box where mine are housed produced one of such importance. The third is that, after nearly twenty years, my friend still cares enough to want to set an old hurt right.

His comment had to do with my pronouncement that I had finally begun to feel optimistic about my life. I had just started graduate school, was dating someone, and had adopted a dog. I felt like pieces of my life were finally beginning to fit with other pieces, like a future was knitting itself together in anticipation of my arrival. I may have said that I was happy for the first time in a long time. I'm pretty sure I described the dog, and maybe the boyfriend too.

Jack responded that my professed happiness had diminished the intensity with which I usually viewed life. My happy letter, it seemed, lacked the usual depth and picking apart of ideas that defined the way Jack and I had always related. With the onset of school and dating and dog-parenthood, I had become externally focused, which apparently I had not been in the five years we had been friends. That was what his letter of 1984 was about.

What I heard in that letter, however, was that I had reached a paradoxical low: happiness had made me boring. Because I had worked hard to stop being unhappy, and because my newfound external focus came as some relief, I felt it was Jack's place, as a good friend, to cheer my arrival into the world of happy people. Instead I heard that my hard work had diminished me. It was this perceived criticism that prompted my five page rebuttal.

There is an old myth that depressed people are more creative and enlightened than their happy counterparts. If you are depressed, this is some consolation. For many years I, along with Jack, believed that creativity and enlightenment had to ride in on the waves of despair. The more despairing you were, the more creative and interesting you must be. I believed this right up until I stopped being so unhappy, and I began to actually finish the projects I started.

When I was depressed, I did think deeply, but mostly about things that further depressed me: namely, about the fact that while depression is painful and difficult to cure, it is preferable to shallow satisfaction. What I didn't consider is that satisfaction need not be shallow, nor must it run interference with wisdom. Contentment, I have learned, can imbue life with a deeper sense of connection to a universe spinning mightily in a soup of things both mundane and miraculous.

It took that mis-heard comment from Jack to make me re-think what I had always believed: that misery propels us toward, and even at times stands in for, enlightenment. Still, I suppose I am an oxymoron to many: I am a happy artist who doesn't feel I've lost brain cells to the supposedly corrosive force of contentment, and I became an artist not because I was unhappy, but because I was not. So I need to write my old friend Jack and tell him it's ok. If not for his comment all those years ago, I might never have challenged the myth of my enlightened angst.