

On Self-Hatred

Becoming historians of ourselves

Few of us who suffer from self-hatred are cleanly aware that we do so. We know the symptoms – the self-doubt, the paranoia, the impostor syndrome, the emotional masochism – but it is counter-intuitive and arduous to trace these troubles back to a singular illness that can be unpicked and assuaged. It may take a good while, perhaps half a lifetime, before we are able to name what has been destroying us all along.

There is a temptation to treat our difficulties narrowly as phenomena of the here and now; we focus on our fears of disappointing our current colleagues, we are revolted by how we look today, we feel in danger of imminent attack and judgement. It takes a bold leap of the mind to imagine that our current feelings about ourselves could derive from our own histories.

Our sense of ourselves, rigidly contemporary though it proposes itself to be, is almost always the residue of how others in the distant past made us feel. We like or dislike ourselves to the extent that we were once liked or disliked by those in whose orbit we developed. It is merely another

regrettable symptom of our disease that we find it so hard to keep our own past in mind and have difficulty using it to correct and nuance how we view our present challenges.

A priority of treatment is therefore to become better historians of our own emotions. We stand to discover that we don't just hate ourselves *per se*, we developed into people who instinctively do so because of the cumulative impact of a number of scenes, characters and atmospheres. These should be retrieved from memory with the patience and deftness of a historian, rooting back in the archives to reassemble the reality of a long-forgotten monarchy or revolution.

Long before there was the current feeling of unease, there would have been someone whose voice we internalised. They might have shamed us about our appearance, or given us a feeling that we were a grave disappointment to them or that we could never measure up to a favoured sibling. They might have ignored us for long stretches, or hit us, or worse. We might have had to observe their rages or tended to them through their depression or manipulative bitterness at an age when we were barely able to look after ourselves.

These incidents led us unconsciously to draw vague yet powerful conclusions about our characters: that there must be something dark and awful about us, that we will invariably be a nuisance to others, that we are selfish and corrupted, that we are the inferiors of those who harm us, that we must appease bullies. We will have forgotten that we came to such conclusions or the reasons why we did so, but that we feel about ourselves as we do today is testament to the historical legacies we are carrying.

As part of our historicising efforts, we might prompt ourselves to finish certain sentences: *My mother made me feel ... My father gave me the sense that ... Compared to my sibling, I believed I was ...* From such blunt instruments, we can assemble a rough first draft of the verdicts that were surreptitiously handed down to us. But we should then move beyond the headlines to remember some of the precise sensory memories that underpin them. When we think of being made to feel ashamed of ourselves, we can wonder what scenes come to mind from the early years.

We should close our eyes and dwell on what spontaneously emerges when we reflect on our beginnings. We should attend to our impressions with the care of a novelist, drawing our fragile intuitions from the penumbra of time

to let them resonate, with all their painful echoes, in the here and now. What kind of day was it? Where were we? How old were we? What did we apparently do wrong? What were we crying about? Can we remember how it ended? What must it have been like that night for us?

With the right sort of prompts and sufficient time on our hands (maybe a quiet hour in bed), we can be reminded of how much denser our past is than it seems day-to-day. There is so much that happened to the smaller version of us, and that is still there in our mental archives, waiting for us to be able to muster the courage and compassion to take a look. Through meditating on ourselves, we may newly remember being 5 or so and overhearing a conversation between our mother and our aunt about how unfortunate-looking we were, and how much this seared us and made us cry and fed a feeling that we could never be good enough. Perhaps we were 7 and on the running track and came fifth in an important race and remember the anger on our father's face and a feeling that we would never be able to satisfy this heroic figure even though we desperately wished to make him proud of us.

We learnt the language of self-hatred over many long years. To unlearn it will be a comparably lengthy process.

We will need to go back and make sense of dozens of scenes of humiliation and unloveability. We will need to re-experience a pain that, at another level, we are profoundly committed to running away from, even as it infects our every contemporary hope for ourselves. For a time, we will need to be angry as we have never been before about scenes that reveal themselves, to objective adult eyes, to be inherently unfair and regrettable. Would we have treated a 5-year-old in that way? Is it right for any child to endure such demands? Who might we have been if we had been handled with greater patience? We can see that there is an alternative to the pitiless conclusions we originally reached when, as children, we concluded that the fault lay entirely with us.

We may have to cry in a way we never have before about sorrows and let-downs we plainly didn't merit. There might be long periods when we feel plunged into a new and unfamiliar despair at everything we have been through. It might seem as if we are hitting a fresh low, but with any luck, this will be part of a necessary catharsis, a step towards reaching a condition of greater self-acceptance and inner lightness. We are not inherently awful, we may eventually conclude, we just had a difficult start in life that we are at last on the way to understanding and contextualising.

Anger

We know so much about the dangers of unacceptable anger – of rage, physical harm, petulance and entitlement. Our societies leave us in no doubt as to the risks of getting cross with other people. But this well-meaning drive towards peaceability threatens to bring about another sort of harm, the kind that follows when legitimate grievance is throttled, and justifiable anger is too quickly swallowed. We can be damaged as much when anger is denied as when it is disproportionately expressed.

We, the self-hating ones, may not even have noticed how hard it is for us to tell someone that they have treated us harshly. We are inclined by our pasts always to excuse those who infringe on our interests and needs and give way to self-laceration and despair instead. The rare occasions when we build up the courage to speak are likely to be followed by long periods of unfocused guilt.

We typically stay silent because we come from a past in which nothing inspired us to expect that we could speak freely. We may have grown up in an environment in which no one wanted to hear our contrary or ‘difficult’ opinions. Under the guise of a devotion to ‘good manners’ or

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‘discipline’, the adults left no room for feedback. There were only certain people who were able to express themselves at will, who were allowed to raise their voices and be sadistic or unreasonable – and they were not the children.

As a result, our anger, which should have emerged outwards, was retained and turned against us. We have come to hate ourselves in lieu of any opportunity to register hatred towards those who do and have done us an injury.

Emotional healing depends on a curious-sounding exercise: before we can be serene and balanced, indeed in order that we can be so, we will have to get more skilled at being for a time less than forgiving and no longer so patient. We will need to take lessons in getting fruitfully annoyed and in experiencing anger with those who have injured us, even if we do this only in our own minds – the targets of our frustration perhaps being now dead or too psychologically blocked to be able to hear us directly.

We should develop the strength occasionally to tell a partner that we are feeling ignored and used. We should tell a colleague that they have not done their fair share.

We might try to explain to a parent that they cannot rely on our goodwill unless they show some understanding of what they have put us through. It will feel deeply uncomfortable when we first try; we may expect that terrible vengeance will be exacted on us for our openness. But we may also discover that those who are truly worthy of our time will be ready to listen to our hurts. We should afford more regularly to exchange self-hatred for lawful and honourable expressions of annoyance.

Beyond people pleasing

It can take a while to see that we aren’t merely polite and well mannered; that we are manically on the side of trying to appease the moods and caprices of others at the cost of our own well-being; that we are inveterate people pleasers.

Children have no practical or psychological alternatives to trying to cosy up to those who reject them. They naturally seek to place the explanation for their poor treatment on themselves. Their excuses for their wayward caregivers may go on without end, inspiring lifelong degrees of tainted creativity: the violence they were on the receiving end of wasn’t ‘just’ violence, they will tell themselves: it

came from pain, it was a sign of strength, it was in a way justified by the bad school report. The emotional neglect was never as bad as such a term makes out: it was merely an old-fashioned toughness linked to admirable traits such as independence and resourcefulness.

We may throw ourselves into our work at school and subsequently in our career as a way of trying to secure the attention of parental figures who seem not to care that we exist. We may make exceptional efforts with our school projects, with our end-of-year exams, with our scholarship papers, because we aren't only attempting to be good students; we are beneath the surface struggling to be the sort of children and humans that can receive the blessing of their creators. We may become known among our friends as 'over-achievers', but the truth is a great deal more poignant: we are the 'under-loved ones' who work furiously to try to feel legitimate in our own eyes.

We need to come to a dispiriting but emancipating realisation: those who demand to be impressed by their own offspring are not worthy of impressing; they are ill. It may look as if, with just another effort, we may finally secure the notice we long for, but we would be better off accepting the darker notion that we will never turn

around someone who hasn't already seen the point of us. A healthy parent does not require a child to perform in order to lend them their attention; they may be pleased when the child is doing well, they may be proud of them at moments of victory, but they do not make performance the sine qua non of their love. This requirement belongs to psychopathology, not aspiration.

The people pleaser needs to learn an unusual and little-mentioned art: that of giving up on people. Rather than continuing to maintain that there must be something wrong with them to explain the sour mood of their caregiver, they should take on board the unfamiliar idea that they have grown up around someone who was severely unwell. Rather than spend their life wondering what is so wrong with them, they can turn the tables and wonder what might have been so wrong with their progenitors for making such peculiar and inordinate demands on them.

We should stop expecting that we are about to be treated well, like an overeager puppy always looking out for signs that their owner has relented and will take them out to the park after all. We have been the lovelorn dog long enough, we have waited for our biscuits for an eternity, and now need to move away from those who exert a mesmeric

hold on us by denying us what should naturally have been offered to us a long time ago.

We don't have to keep searching for an offence we haven't committed. We have done well enough at work; we are sufficiently intelligent and decent looking. We have served far too long an apprenticeship in the school of suffering. It is time to make the remarkable discovery that we can dismiss others as they have dismissed us and concentrate for the remainder of our days on those blessed souls who already know how to freely grant us the kindness and approval we are worthy of.

What love really is

Part of the process of overcoming self-hatred involves learning more about what love really is, so that we can detect its absence in the way we treat ourselves and start to nurture and honour its presence in our hearts.

As self-haters, we typically harbour an unhelpfully Romantic view of love, which proposes that love is the reward given to a person for their strengths: it is what someone can expect to receive when they are beautiful, rich, impressive or popular. According to this philosophy,

the most loveable person on earth is simultaneously the most gifted and consummate one.

But there is another, broader, nobler conception that understands love not as a reward for strength but as a sympathy for, and commitment to attending to, weakness. Love is what we spontaneously feel when we see a small baby, helpless before the world, reaching out for our finger, clasping it tight and pulling a frail and grateful smile. Love is what we feel when a friend tells us that they cannot cope anymore, that they have reached the end of their tether and are desperate for reassurance and comfort. Love is what we feel when we see a stranger who longs for food and shelter and detect their humanity in their eyes as we buy them some supper and arrange a bed for them for the night. Love is what we register when our partner, usually composed and competent, breaks down and comes to us with apology and confusion, begging for our help.

However impressed we may be by paragons of beauty and flawless achievement, what we truly stand to love in others are displays of vulnerability. We begin to love, rather than merely admire, someone when they no longer have to be perfect and strong, but can instead show us the struggle

that is involved in being them, when they let us in on the pain behind their facade of competence.

We should take inspiration from registering when we are moved to redefine our sense of the love we should show ourselves and seek from others. The people we should put our faith in are those who do not recoil from us in our frightened or hesitant moments, those who don't just want to clap at us and be awed by our triumphs. They are those who can be moved by our crises, who are on hand in the dark hours, who we know will still be around when the rest of the world is jeering at us.

Similarly, the properly self-loving person isn't the one who congratulates themselves when they have pulled off an astonishing feat; it's the one who knows how to speak to themselves in a kind voice when it has all gone wrong, who can remain kind in the face of ill fortune, who doesn't have to berate or criticise themselves without mercy. We should feel proud of having attained a capacity for such love. It isn't weakness or charity; it is an achievement founded on the most dignified understanding of what we must do to accede to our full humanity.

We will have finally learnt to love both ourselves and

others when it is fragility and imperfection that touch us and incite our desire to assist, to understand and to console.

Self-forgiveness

Our refusal to forgive ourselves for our mistakes tends to hang on a strong sense of how much these were, in the end, avoidable. We obsessively go back over our slips and errors and contrast what did happen with what could so easily have been skirted if we had not been so fatuous and so witless. We experience recurring jabs of pain at the disjuncture between the agonising present and its now-vanished alternative: we should never have written that email, we should never have become involved with that person, we should have listened more closely to the advice, we should never have borrowed the money ...

Alongside the pain come questions: Why didn't we have greater foresight? Why couldn't we muster more self-restraint? How could we have been so indiscreet? From this close up, there are no realistic, let alone kind, ways to answer our punitive self-interrogations; as a result, they are likely to go on forever, without let up in agony. We will at best conclude that we messed up because we were

greedy, because we were vain, shallow, intemperate and weak-willed; that we have ruined our lives because we are lustful, hare-brained, immature and egocentric.

Our self-hatred will grow ever more intense as we contrast our soiled lives with the impeccable choices of others. The reasonable and good ones, the calm and happy ones, had it right all along: they didn't succumb to temptations, they stayed steady and dutiful, they kept their priorities straight and paid due respect to public opinion. The overall conclusion is that we are simply awful people, who should probably (depending on the severity of the problem we are in) kill ourselves forthwith.

If we are to avoid eternal self-loathing or suicide, we will have to find another approach. We cannot forever explain our mistakes by examining this or that local flaw in our characters. We need to lean on a far more holistic and objective answer. We messed up because we are human, which in this context means that we belong to a species that is compelled by its very nature to steer through life without the knowledge and experience required to ensure goodness and wisdom, kindness and happiness.

We may regret this or that error, but from the right

distance, we are fundamentally steering blind and are therefore doomed to slip up with greater or lesser severity at some point or other. We can't know exactly whom we should marry. We don't have fool-proof knowledge of where our real talents lie, let alone how the economy will perform, and therefore can't determine the sort of career we should optimally invest ourselves in. We may make a reasonable guess at what activities and situations might be dangerous, but we cannot know ahead of time exactly where the true risks lie; there are landmines buried everywhere. Assumptions made in one era may fail to be correct in another. We can be caught out by swift changes in mores: what could have been acceptable at one point can turn into an indecency a few years later.

Certainly, we may have experienced a particularly jagged edge of life that has destroyed us in a very specific way. But though the wound is local, the injury is almost endemic. It could have been foretold from the start that something bad would happen to us at some moment, not because there is anything especially deficient about us, but because human brains are lacking the necessary matter to lead us faultlessly through the decades-long obstacle course of life.

That said, our self-contempt tends to be heightened because we refuse to think about luck. We look at where we have ended up and compare it with the more fortunate places of others and come to only one verdict: we must have been more stupid than they are, our characters must have been more corrupt than theirs. But in the process, we miss out on a critical explanatory factor: whatever our flaws may have been, we may have had to contend with a particularly vicious swerve of fate. There have been people every bit as hasty or unreasonable as us who (for now) have sailed on unmolested. Events have pressed more harshly on the vulnerable parts of our personalities. Anyone who would have been tested as we were would have failed in comparable ways. In assessing our destiny, we should remember to claim a very large role for the forces of foul luck.

At the same time, we do ourselves an injury by comparing ourselves only with those above us, rather than considering our state in the round. In our abject moods, we look enviously at those who are presently riding high while failing to consider the hundreds, even millions, of those who have endured destinies every bit as cruel as our own. The human condition has seldom been a smiling one: we should not compound our difficulties by refusing

to consider all those who have wept every bit as much as us and lost even more than us.

Nor should we keep equating ourselves with people who, while they might have some superficial similarities with us in terms of age or educational background, in the end had incomparably different psychological beginnings. They didn't have our parents, they didn't have to go through what we did, they didn't have to master our emotional immaturities. They may seem to be our equals but they in fact belong to a more blessed cohort. We should nurture sympathy for ourselves based on a fine-grained appreciation of the specific burdens we had to take on.

A degree of regret may sometimes be helpful: it can help us to take stock of errors and to avoid the worst of the pitfalls next time. But runaway self-hatred serves no useful purpose; it is, in its masochistic way, an indulgence we can't afford. We may be foolish, but this doesn't single us out as particularly awful or unusual; it only confirms that we belong to the human race, a fact for which we deserve limitless sympathy and compassion.