Living Life to the Fullest

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A recent series of e-mails has offered me an opportunity to state succinctly a philosophy of life (and to offer another writer's insights regarding what I will call untamed or unleashed psychotherapy). To give a foretaste: It might be said that if you had sufficient money to pay someone to clean your house or apartment, having such a person would leave you more time for more pleasureful or important activities (to say nothing of the feeling of being able to employ others to do your work for you, or the feeling of being one of the people who has a "cleaning lady"). But this ignores what might be experienced in cleaning your own house: engagement with the grime, dust and disorder. I do *not* mean by this that disorder, or grime or dust, is bad, or that one might, through house-cleaning, come to realize one's fundamental shortcomings or corruption. I mean that disorder, grime and dust are as much a part of life as order and cleanliness.

The e-mails came to me from someone who is a very big reader of books, many of them quite serious—books that propose ways of living more happily, in the sense of with greater tranquility. In particular, the writers, who often cite Eastern philosophies and religious texts, propose ways of living with less inner conflict and in less conflict with others and with one's circumstances. "From last night's reading," the first e-mail said, "I like the term 'afflictive emotions' for the emotions that make life less fun."

I do not know what writer came up with this combination "afflictive emotions," nor what uses s/he made of it. But s/he has, inter alia, propelled me to here say yes, afflictive emotions are part of human life. We might quickly note afflictive emotions associated with death, and also those that can be born of trying to work with other people, or of trying to live with them or of being related to them, along with other afflictive emotions that are by-products of conscious perception and reflection and of self-consciousness more particularly.

In a canal lock a good deal of energy is used to pump water against gravity and thus to allow barges to pass smoothly and safely upstream and down. Similarly it is possible for a human being to invest energy in combating afflictive emotions, and thereby to make her or his life feel smoother and safer. Likely at various moments there will be storms: external or internal events of such power that the individual will lack the power to maintain his or her equanimity. But, after some period of disorder and grieving, with effort the equanimity might be re-established.

Many potential, technically feasible canals are not built, and of the built none are always utilized for transporting goods, because sometimes these actions are not considered cost effective. And if we assume (not necessarily or always correctly) that energy is not available for free and in unlimited quantities, and thus that energy devoted to one task reduces the amount available for other tasks, we can similarly conclude that there will be people who prefer to devote their energy to other causes besides equanimity. There will be situations in which many if not all people will choose to give their energy to some other task—e.g., looking for a new job, building a business or teaching children, or aggressively defending their families, countries or possessions or their religion or philosophy of life, be this through networking or debate or with violence.

It is also that case that both pumping water and the pursuit of equanimity involve working against natural forces (e.g. gravity or "afflictive emotions"). An alternative is to accept that unpleasant aspects of life, for all they are unpleasant, are also aspects of life. One might argue that if one accepts rather than combats the unpleasantness, energy will be available for other tasks. And readers may have previously noted a contradiction: If seeking equanimity

involves combating conflict and unpleasant feelings, then, in some sense, it entangles us yet further in combat, in conflict. (If you prefer, we could speak of setting aside or, say, letting go of conflicts and unwanted feelings, and thus we would be entangled in either setting aside or letting go.) Those who have been associated with cultures, religions, organizations or individuals who seek to suppress the expressing of anger or the direct expressing of disagreement may have a strong, even visceral sense of what I am talking about here.

There is at least one other argument against seeking equanimity in a world that includes afflictive emotions and conflict (and this notwithstanding our ability to appreciate that from a longer-term, cosmic perspective, "I" and *homo sapiens* and all our emotions, conflicts and lettings-go are next to nothing). To seek to work against nature, against the is, is to seek not to live life to its fullest. If, for example, a child or parent dies, or if a close relationship breaks up, the grief we feel may be extremely painful; for some, if not many, the grief may be unbearably painful, and one may seek relief in drugs or alcohol, meditation, religious observances, strenuous exercise, world travel, all sorts of things. We have great sympathy for people (ourselves included!) who engage in these behaviors, but we may also note that the person who is able, for whatever reason, to fully appreciate the forces, unpleasant, pleasant and otherwise, of which s/he is a part—such a person (perhaps more an ideal than an actual individual) might be said to be living life to the fullest.

The e-mailer would like to retain his or her anonymity. For the purposes of the present piece it is only necessary to suggest a split between, on the one hand, reading, exercises and meditation done for psychological purposes, and, on the other hand, work done for financial-profit-seeking institutions, work done to pay for nice living quarters and similar pleasures and to exercise mental capacities other than those used, for example, in meditation. A subsequent e-mail stated:

> In a meditation practice you start noticing, embracing, understanding and letting go of afflictive emotions. The difference between people who embrace some kind of meditation practice, for example, and those who don't becomes quite large over time, with meditators getting more of the good stuff.

What interests me particularly here is this connection of noticing, embracing and understanding emotions with letting go of them. To me this is close to the philosophy

behind Freudian psychotherapy, an approach to life and emotions that I have found quite appealing. In such psychotherapy it is not that one ever quite lets go of one's emotions (e.g. regarding childhood conflicts), but it is thought that, through noticing, trying to understand, and "owning" (if not quite embracing) emotions, . . . It is as if one creates space, puts a distance between some sort of emotional reservoir (or swamp) and one's conscious mind and even one's will. Because one feels more fully, but less furiously, one is able to act (or react) less emotionally. Mixing our metaphors a bit, we could say that the well-therapized would spend much less time letting off steam or even trying to drive a steam-powered train, and thus have more time for other, less risky or demanding activities.

I offer this as a rough sketch of some of the theory behind a particular therapeutic approach. I offer this sketch in part in order to disagree somewhat with the approach. That is, it has seemed to me that a version of the Freudian approach, what I am here calling untamed or unleashed psychotherapy, indeed offers one a fuller life, but such a life is in many ways *more difficult* rather than easier to live. This might be quite simply stated: Life is not easy, and so to be more in touch with life is to be more in touch with not-easiness (among other things).

In my experience, the great seer of such unleashed psychotherapy has been the British sociologist and psychotherapist (and cancer victim) Ian Craib, in his book *The Importance of Disappointment*. I will conclude the present commentary by quoting at length from the concluding paragraphs of that book:

> If I put a hand in the fire and it is burnt, I will not do it again in a hurry; psychotherapy says, in one sense, put your hand in the fire and keep it there. Psychological development depends on 'staying' in the fire, to the point where we begin to understand the pain and find that it is bearable, and that it might even be used in some way. This is a process which perhaps in other ages might simply have been called 'life', and it certainly has to do with being, not with doing. Perhaps one way of characterising psychotherapy is as a process of learning to be, when neither the process nor the being itself is necessarily a comfortable experience. . . .
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> The movement towards external and internal reality makes life both easier and harder; energy involved, in this example, in denial is released . . . and can be put to other, more productive purposes. The price is experiencing a real and appropriate fear; perhaps the best description of this dimension of psychotherapy is of learning how to suffer.

Link & Afterwords

Ian Craib died in 2002 at the age of 57. He was first diagnosed with cancer in 1993, and then spent a highly productive decade writing through the pain, the treatments, the fears and sadness. A nice collection of **memories and obituaries of Craib** written by his colleagues and by his teenage son includes these words from his son:

> He had the amazing ability to always see the opposites in situations, which could be both thrilling and infuriating–a gift and a curse he called it. He used this to always try and maintain a sense of reality, whatever. He was accused of being a pessimist, which was probably true. But this was my dad. His insight, to see the bad in good and the good in bad, was part of his greater, sensitive, often magical view of the complication and contradiction in life.

I do not recall Ian Craib writing about this in *The Importance of Disappointment*, but his son touches on it in the lines quoted above: If a person to whom you are close chooses or is chosen, to live a hard life—if he, say, chooses to try to embrace the not-easiness of life, this will affect you too. You will be taken along on his uneasy voyage, a not always willing passenger. A child cannot during his or her childhood choose another route, though a spouse, lover or friend can. This does not mean that I would counsel getting the hell away from people who choose to try to live life to the fullest in the sense in which I have outlined it in this piece. But I am well acquainted with the challenges, the not-easiness, and not just for one person.

The End.