

Notes on Emotional Sobriety

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Emotional sobriety is, in part, about growing up. It is, in part, about detachment; about letting go of the things to which I cling, and I know myself to be capable of clinging to almost anything. But above all, for me, it is about insight. It is a matter of developing the skill of seeing, and seeing clearly—not so that I can judge, and label aspects of experience “good” or “bad”—but so that I can accurately evaluate what is going on around and within me, and make skillful decisions about how to act.

The determining factor in whether I am able to see things clearly, and therefore in whether I deal with situations skillfully, is my own frame of mind; and for me, emotional sobriety hinges upon an ongoing effort to maintain as balanced, or neutral, a frame of mind as I possibly can. That is, for starters, virtually impossible for a human being; by definition, I am subjective, a single consciousness, sharply limited by the parameters not only of what I perceive but also of what I wish to perceive.

In other words, my mind—all minds—tilt ever toward their own convenience, preference, bias, and ultimately ease. When reality does not conform to those things, my mind begins to revolt; it begins to correct, to reshape, to revise what it perceives to suit itself. Thus, one of my tasks as a human being seeking balance, accuracy, and emotional skill is to work directly against the habits of my own mind. In some ways,

I must guard against aspects of my own humanness, if I wish to become more humane.

Here's a phrase I like: It is what it is.

I can't tell you when that phrase came into ubiquitous usage. It's an interesting intersection between the superficiality of pop culture parlance, humanist ethics, and the maddening wisdom of simple truth. It's a phrase I use a lot, both aloud and in conversation with myself. It keeps me mindful of a central fact of existence that I am still terribly prone to forget: I am not running this particular show. Reality—what is, in the cosmic sense—does not answer to me or to my whims, nor will it, nor should that come as a surprise. The world in which I live, the people with whom I connect, the lives that intersect with mine, are not under my purview, nor is their behavior something that I can control. They are what they are; it is what it is.

The extent of my serenity, stability, and—above all—peace, is directly proportionate to my awareness of reality, and my willingness to accept and to deal with reality as such. These are words that get thrown around a lot—awareness, willingness, acceptance. They are also conditions, states of mind, emotional places in which I can situate myself, and from which I can proceed. I *can*—sometimes I don't. When I do, I find myself better able to navigate reality as it is. When I don't, I find myself quickly, and often seriously, lost in the weeds.

The weeds—those patches of our interior landscape that are clogged with rot and murk, stagnant water, slick patches, sinkholes, and general stink—are a little different for each of us, I suppose, though I'd venture that the emotional swamps into which we wander, whether through laziness, willfulness, or nothing more complex than a lack of compass and map, are not as terminally unique and intriguing as we might like to believe. Lately, I find that the larger world seems particularly rife with opportunities for me to go tromping off the path my better self would choose; at every turn, it seems, I'm faced with the option of indulging my taste for anger, self-righteousness, judgment, critique, finger-pointing, and blame; turn another direction, I find equally rich opportunities to wade into the fray of hopelessness, helplessness, solipsism, self-hatred, drama, and despair. Around the corner, I find a chorus of support for my materialism, acquisitiveness, superficiality, vanity, and greed; a bit down the way, I come across a virtually limitless source of justifications for all the self-justification I could ever need.

As with most everything else that's interesting, the process of seeking out and deepening emotional sobriety involves grappling with that kind paradox. Here's another one: in order to become less selfish, I really do need to understand myself. That, for me, requires a practice of identifying patterns; patterns I have learned, patterns I've developed, patterns of behavior and thought that recur in my life, across eras and decades, across states and countries, across friendships and relationships, workplaces and places of spiritual practice, across substances and compulsions. Until and unless I recognize the patterns in my life—patterns not

imposed by “destiny” or stumbled upon by random “chance,” but that I myself continue to construct and reconstruct, regardless of external circumstance—I will not be able to see that I am responsible for their existence, nor will I understand at any deep level that I and only I have the power to put them to rest.

The pattern most familiar to me, the one I cannot say I “like” but also cannot fairly say I don’t, given the frequency with which it has cropped up in my life, albeit wearing any number of different hats, is the pattern of crisis. Crisis—the word itself—describes a single event; one says, I am in crisis, I am having a crisis, there is a crisis, this is a crisis. But the idea of crisis as singular, as isolated, belies a misunderstanding of science; specifically, the idea that crisis is sudden denies the fundamental cosmic law of cause and effect. Crisis is never without cause; it is never sudden, or random. It is always the culmination of previous events, actions and reactions; it is always an effect. Once set in motion, of course, crisis can become self-perpetuating: crisis gives rise to crisis gives rise to crisis, and then there you are in the pattern of crisis, looking back across 30 or 40 or 70 or 85 years of a lifetime spent setting fires and trying to put them out.

Anton Chekhov is said to have said, “Any idiot can handle a crisis.” And indeed, most of us, probably, grew up with or in enough chaos to come by our familiarity and skill with crisis management honestly enough. The challenge in emotional sobriety is to learn other skills; and the reward of deepening emotional sobriety over time is in becoming adept at other, quieter, and ultimately more lasting things.

The cycle of crisis goes more or less like this: we come from the lives from which we come. They are messy and full of crisis. We may develop a certain pride, perhaps earned, but not productive, in how much we have lived through, how bravely we've fought, how hard-won our survival is. And it is. But once we've moved out of that stage of our lives, where do we go? What is our purpose? What makes us feel useful, skillful, fulfilled? What feeds our sense that we are needed, wanted, loved? What earns us our place on the planet? How do we stave off the boredom of regular life, when crisis has shaped our understanding of what it means to feel alive?

Discomfort sets in—an itch, an emptiness, a restlessness, an ache. Some kind of internal pressure that builds in us, and wants to break. It keeps us up nights, dipping our toes in the shallows of water we often know runs deeper than we can see. We turn and reach for it, whatever it is—if not the bottle or drug or behavior we've sworn off, then some safer substitute—the lover with whom we do nothing but fight, the family drama that's not ours to fix, the friend who's incessantly a mess, the shopping, the food, the porn, the rabbit hole websites, something as simple and harmless as work. Hours, days, weeks, months later, we look up, and wonder where the time has gone. There's a pang of guilt, of fear that's uncomfortable; and then we dive back in.

Whatever the specifics of this pattern are for each of us, the cycle is the same: we seek comfort, solace, and often escape. We find it, for a time. But the addictive

process, which we all know well enough, never ends at that. A desire for comfort becomes craving; craving gives way to seeking; seeking gives rise to the chase, and the thrill of the chase; when we catch what we think we're seeking, we cling to it, depend upon it, and at the same instant, quickly realize that even the thing is not enough; craving sets in again. We push it, and push it, and push it, until we're at crisis, once again.

The pattern of crisis isn't the only pattern to which I'm prone to fall prey; there are plenty of others. But it is the one that is most all consuming, and the most distracting; it functions to take me out of my own life, out of this world, out of reality as it is. Emotional sobriety, for me, requires attention to that reality, and acceptance of it; it also allows me to find, in that reality, beauty, peace, transformation, and joy.