

Disillusionment

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Among the many experiences woven into our life-journeys along the long, winding, and often rocky road to human maturity is *disillusionment*. I wouldn't say that this is necessarily the single most important experience in our spiritual and practical growth, but it's certainly a recurring event of significant meaning and import. It's hard for me to imagine that anyone could achieve authentic maturity, graceful consciousness, and full personhood without undergoing quite a bit of disillusionment.

I don't use that word in its typical connotative implications, which can include bitterness, disappointment, and even cynicism as negative reactions. Instead, I mean *dis-illusionment* in the more technical and neutral sense of seeing or realizing that an illusion one has assumed to be real and embraced as a belief (sometimes unconsciously, but often quite fervently and with great insistence) is simply false. Removed from all the ego-bullshit and habit formations we're saddled with, the experience of realizing that our illusions are false is an event worthy of both joy and relief. It's a really great experience — like coming home to ourselves after a difficult journey that didn't work and was never truly fulfilled.

Fantasies are all well and good as long as we know that they're dreams rather than realities. I don't expect people to live without fantasies or dreams. They can be lovely and helpful rather than harmful. They can increase our sense of wonder and possibility and illuminate our path forward. But fantasies and dreams are not always beneficent, especially not when they're a response to fear and pain. Then they become escapes rather than guides, temporary respites from whatever parts of reality seem to us too harsh to entertain or accept. Sometimes we go so far down the rabbit hole with our fantasies that we lose ourselves. Like self-driving cars, our psyches and our lives need the monitoring of consciousness to take us safely down the road. Sometimes, and often for some of us, our involvement with fantasy can become the equivalent of drunk driving.

In general, I disagree with the New Age notion that "thoughts are things." Sometimes, perhaps that's true — such as when we believe our thoughts uncritically, accept whatever emotions they generate as inevitable and correct, and act upon either or both without sentience. That's when our fantasies become toxic. But that's the worst case scenario. Many other ways of being are possible.

What happens for some of us on occasion and for others of us much of the time is that we don't understand whatever we're experiencing. It's like being in a dream and not knowing that it's a dream. We're "in" the experience and overwhelmed by it, but without any perspective on it. *Be Here Now* is good advice, but it doesn't imply losing oneself in an experience. Awareness requires contrast. Involvement is terrific, but without at least a little bit of proper detachment, it goes awry and drowns us.

What we often don't realize is that our most deeply-held fantasies are pointing out to us where we have trouble with reality. That's a wonderful insight, but it tends to be rare and special. Much more commonly, we regard our fantasies as preferable to the fearful or otherwise unpleasant realities we're trying to prevent, avoid, or get around. Our fears may or may not be accurate, which is to say reflected in reality, but once we are gripped by fear, the whole inner landscape of consciousness is reordered. All possibilities collapse into a binary duality of pain and pleasure, anxiety and escape.

Pain is not something we perceive at a distance. This is true whether the pain is bodily or psychic, physical or emotional. Having seen the pain coming from however far off, we are then instantly in it. Once seen, it's already present, and we're caught in the suffering, even though the fearful thing itself hasn't actually happened yet in objective reality. The fact that it may or may not occur at some point in the future is irrelevant. Once we anticipate pain, it's inevitable. At that point, we need a remedy, something that will allow us to escape the pain. That's where fantasies come in, not as natural (which is OK and healthy, but as a response to suffering — pleasure as an antidote to pain. That's also OK as a temporary rebalancing, but it's a very slippery slope. Addiction to pain-killers is a real thing that's sometimes fatal. And fantasies can be as lethal as Oxycontin or Fentanyl.

Once caught in pain born of fear, fantasies then arise or are chosen as possible escapes. And they work to provide relief while we focus on them. When we put them down, however, the pain returns. So, we end up investing more and more of our time and energy into these pleasurable fantasies, effectively turning them into ambitions and habits. The result of that investment is increasing attachment. We grow "heavier" as we cling more tightly to our fantasies. Just as inflammation is the primary cause of illness in the body, so increasing attachment leads to inflammation in the psyche. This makes it more likely that disillusionment — which will be confronted inevitably, sooner or later — will be painful rather than joyous.

Thus, we arrive at the typical connotations of disillusionment — bitterness, disappointment, and cynicism. Those attitudes are like the scar tissue that comes from the wounds of attachment. Sure, that's a metaphor, but it's a pretty good one. Clinging too tightly to our escapist illusions can twist us into pretzels, and that has an inflammatory effect that produces "lesions" within the psyche.

Healing occurs when we're able to accept reality as it is, without overlaying our ego's judgments onto it. The fear of suffering runs very deep in most of us (at least it does in everyone I know, including me). The fact that we frequently "seize up" in anticipation of pain is very understandable. It's no wonder that so many of us resist being dis-illusioned with all our might. From the standpoint of the ego, dis-illusionment means that we were wrong, foolish, and stupid. That's not true, but try to convince the ego of that. Being humble is good; being humiliated sucks. For the ego, disillusionment tends to be humiliation.

This is the dilemma we find ourselves in here in present-day America. The country is in desperate need of a good cleansing through dis-illusionment, but that's very difficult to come by. Each of the thousands of different illusions that have captivated and entranced us is supported by millions of "true believers." True believers are people whose faith is unshakeable. They resist disillusionment and deny that they are hypnotized by a falsehood to their dying breath. No "evidence," no matter how compelling, can penetrate their armor or loosen their grip on fantasy. The cognitive dissonance is too great for them to face or bear. And indeed, many human beings go all the way to their deaths fervently believing the same fictions they embraced over an entire lifetime. Habits are hard to break, and dictatorial control of the self by the ego is often permanent.

And yet, even for true believers, disillusionment can and does occur. Not for all, of course, but for some. There is no single reason or simple, pat formula for how this transpires, but it may. Examples of this abound from every arena of human experience: The once absolutely gung-ho soldier who later becomes an anti-war activist or a healer offering aid and comfort to other ex-soldiers suffering from PTSD, the former cult member who later works to de-program other cultists, or the abusive alcoholic who ends up as a committed and kind counselor in AA. Some sinners become saints.

Here as elsewhere, though, the entire bell curve of possibilities can be seen. At one end is the person who, having been disillusioned, responds with grace and maturity, integrating the profound Ah-Ha of awakening into a framework of greater wisdom. At the other end of the scale is the person who, having been disabused of one extreme and dogmatic illusion, flips over to the other side and adopts exactly the opposite fantasy, but with the same extremism and dogma. It's as if some people get the cosmic joke, understanding the punch line with a smile, while others never see the humor at all.

My intention here is compassionate rather than critical. I'm not pointing the finger of blame at anyone. We all need help, whatever help we can get — from life, from nature, from the gods, from other people, and from ourselves — in learning to breathe, to relax, to accept reality as it is, rather than how we wish or believe it to be.