

Solace

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Solace:

noun

*comfort in sorrow, misfortune, or trouble;
alleviation of distress or discomfort;
something that gives comfort, consolation, or relief.*

verb (used with object)

*to comfort, console, or cheer (a person, oneself, the heart, etc.);
to alleviate or relieve (sorrow, distress, etc.).*

I was talking on the phone recently to one of my closest inner core friends, a man I've known for more than 40 years, someone with whom I've walked through the three decades of mid-life and now well into Act Three of elder hood.

We are both in our mid-70s now — I just turned 73, while my friend is 75 — and, as is the case with so many of my peers, we both suffer from serious and chronic ailments surrounding our physical health. Historically, my friend was both vital and very healthy. His choices in lifestyle and diet were impeccable. By contrast, I've never been especially healthy, and my compulsions often got in the way of the kind of lifestyle I felt would be best, but — despite frequent illness and numerous episodes that brought me to the brink of death — I too have been vital and passionate in living. A joke I often tell myself and others is that I wonder how many "cat lives" I have left, that I am surely down to only one or two remaining, and I may even have none. Rim shot at the black humor.

We've both been moderately successful in longstanding careers we carved out for ourselves — 50 years as a working astrologer for me, 40 years of nutritional and wellness consulting for my friend — and while neither of us is likely to ever choose to retire completely, we've reached a point where we've allowed our practices to slow so as to accommodate our current situations.

Our conversations surround the fact that we're both well into Act Three, and that we are all too aware that our journeys will be coming to a close. Speaking in the most general way, people younger than 30 are functionally immortal in their own minds. Death is an abstraction for most of them. People in mid-life are aware of their mortality, but death is still sufficiently far off in the distance that they don't think about it every day. Those who live long enough to reach what is blithely called "old age" are not only aware that their lives are winding down, but the

fact that death awaits us all becomes a palpable presence that increases dramatically with each passing decade.

In our 60s, a significant percentage of people are still able to cling to the assumptions of mid-life, with its pleasurable illusions of permanence, beauty, vitality, and viability. That tends to fade out as we enter our 70s, where declining health and increasingly impaired function on multiple fronts greet many of us.

When my friend and I talk on the phone (he lives in Minnesota; I live in Missouri), the "catching up on events since our last conversation" that kicks off most dialogues typically has (as a baseline) the sharing of information about our latest adventures — or often, misadventures — in the land of institutional medicine. We tell each other our ongoing stories of doctors, tests, and various procedures, along with whatever emotions we're going through in dealing with our bodily difficulties and the indignities of addressing them.

This is just set-up, however, merely the hors' d'oeuvres of our meal. The main course of our conversations lies in trying to address the practical, psychological, and even metaphysical implications of the question "OK, *what now?*" Although my friend is physically healthier overall than I am and more able to participate in the activities and events of the "regular" world (meaning that he still goes many places and does many things that younger humans do), we both feel the limitations pressing in on us that much of what society regards as essential (and "normal") human activities has passed us by. "*Been there, done that — it's over*" is something we all face — eventually but inevitably. Despite the obvious differences in the particulars of what is taken from each of us and how we lose whatever we had, the most truly substantive difference from one person to another concerning those losses is when they happen, meaning at whatever chronological age each reduction becomes obvious.

What is no longer viable is not merely an issue of being physically abled or disabled. That's certainly relevant and often the most obvious factor in the diminishment of aging. Still, physical functionality is only one element. Our forced surrenders also are connected to how many illusory promises one believed or invested one's energy in. Much of what people do in society is not very meaningful. Heck, some of it is downright silly or stupid. But then, doing silly or stupid things isn't rare, especially when we're young. Meaningful or not, though, most of the embodied experiences available to us are usually linked to dreams, fantasies, and other illusions that are marketed within society as supposedly valid sources of happiness and fulfillment. Here in my mid-70s, most of that marketing has paled for me. I have no wish to involve myself in the bulk of illusions that constitute modern civilization, or, at the very least, living "the good life" in America.

For instance, I've spent a large part of my seven decades pursuing political awareness, which, in my case, means researching collective policies, so as to

be well-informed, and holding strong opinions about how society and culture are run and might be run better. At this point, however, I'm just about done with that. The illusions of politics — which is arguably a game based largely on lies and deceit — are no longer compelling for me. Over my 73 years, I've seen too much, I've learned too much, and I know too much.

The COVID pandemic has been a watershed in ripping the mask off America's crumbling institutions and increasingly bankrupt authority. The commonly shared beliefs that held society together and allowed this country to function have come apart at the seams. America's "can-do competence" has been washed away in a tsunami of lies, corruption, and greed. So, that's a double-whammy for me where politics is concerned. Both my own personal journey and where we are collectively, as a society in decline, have resulted in whatever slim hopes I felt about politics as an answer to anything going belly up finally.

OK, fine. Along with so many other concerns and endeavors, politics once seemed (very early in my life) like "good food." Over time, my view changed. Either the food spoiled or it turned out to be not so healthy in the first place. A similar process applies elsewhere — to actual food, for instance. Agribusiness has literally poisoned Americans. Medicine, insurance, and finance are all corrupt. On another, more personal front, I haven't had a romance or a lover for almost 30 years and — truth be told — I don't miss either. I had my fill of all that in real experience from age 20 to 45, and finally it wasn't that great. So, whether it's politics or love affairs, I really do think it's quite reasonable to just let them go, along with so many other previous interests and experiences.

Simplify, minimalize, clean out the larder, and take out the trash. Terrific. But then, what to replace all that with? How to spend my time instead of being concerned with the madness of politics or the insanity of romantic obsession? Yeah, sure, it's all well and good from the standpoint of Buddhist practice to get off the Wheel of Samsara. Clearly, though, I haven't attained Enlightenment, because I still want SOMETHING.

My friend and I have been discussing this dilemma. We couch it sometimes in terminology that has been used often in culture about youth versus old age, with the many comparisons and contrasts between them. We try (as well as we're able) to not be simple-minded about this. As much as possible, we avoid harsh judgments and knee-jerk platitudes: Young people are stupid; old people are ugly, those sorts of obvious stereotypical brutalities. We try to maintain at least a modicum of open-hearted compassion for what human beings have to go through at every chronological age, in each stage of the journey, and in every chapter of the story. If, as Buddhism holds, desire, craving, and attachment are primary sources of suffering in life, then I'm still going to suffer, because I still find all three as active forces within my psyche.

We try to acknowledge that joy and suffering intertwine, and that the challenge of each station along the road of life is, in one way or another, to choose the joy and minimize the suffering that accompany whatever is offered, whether sparse or bountiful. Sometimes finding the joy is easy. Other times it's damned hard. Sometimes, we can transcend suffering. Other times it has us and we can't escape. Viewed from any time frame more than momentary perspective, such as a year or a decade, the overall balance between joy and suffering in one's life is clearly an important indicator.

The past four years have been extremely difficult for me. I don't know whether joy has left the building or it's just my ability to *feel* joy that has diminished, but the steady increase of suffering in my life over that period — mostly physical, but also psychological, and (dare I say) spiritual — has tilted the balance in a direction that alarms me.

In a recent conversation with my dear friend, I brought up the unpleasant subject of my feeling despair at the state of the world and the condition of my own life. After a half hour or so where we chewed on the circumstances of my suffering and came up with no easy solutions, my friend offered an option to consider. *Maybe, he said, some compensation for all you've lost might be found in the wisdom you've earned.*

My immediate first reaction was to think, no way. All the wisdom in the world won't be sufficient to counterbalance the massive losses in the pleasures of experience and the endlessly increasing pain of suffering that comes with old age in my failing body. And even if it might, I'm not close to wise enough for that to work. Thinking that I am somehow wise (with a capital W) is just downright arrogant. Sure, I'm probably out on the fourth standard deviation of the bell curve and far from the center in terms of "normalcy," but that just makes me different, not special. If there's one disturbed quality that always makes me react with horror in myself and others, it's our tendency believe in our superiority — either innate or through achievement — compared to others. That hubris seems to me downright fatal.

Hell, I already feel bad that whatever inner work I've done on myself over my lifetime hasn't been sufficient to carry me through this difficult phase of aging and loss with dignity. I'm disappointed to see how easy it's been for physical suffering and a world gone mad to make a mockery of all my efforts to mature and transcend the illusions of life. Yes, in terms of illness and pain, my suffering has been significant, but I can't say that it's radically worse than other people may experience as they too move through old age in Act Three and toward death. Everyone plays the hand they're dealt, and we get whatever we get. Often, that's suffering. And so, in this moment where I feel utterly incompetent to live in this crazy world with some semblance of grace, the idea presented by my friend of my being "compensated" by "wisdom" initially struck me as absurd.

If I'm to be considered one of the "wise" elders, then everyone is in deeper trouble than I ever imagined.

But wait. Maybe there's another way to think about this. Perhaps rather than focusing on wisdom, I might try putting the emphasis on compassion and kindness. Achieving those have been equal goals for me in my inner work on myself. I mean, grace is not just being smart or wise, it's also about choosing compassion, love, and kindness. Despite my recent tendency to reject myself as having failed in my efforts to mature — those hard-won perspectives do not seem diminished.

That's when I came up with the term I can use instead of wisdom to try to restore meaning for my life (which is not over yet). That term is *solace*.

Given where we are collectively and the numerous horsemen of the apocalypse that are bearing down on humanity and modern civilization, maybe we need something more relevant than outright denial, sticking our heads in the sand, or embracing the illusory solutions that are offered to stave off disaster while keeping our habitual expectations intact. None of those will work to save us from what's coming.

Maybe it's time for solace, for the act of finding or providing comfort in sorrow. Perhaps the best we can do to alleviate the shock and horror of devastation that are almost certainly right around the corner would be to provide at least some consolation through compassion, love, and kindness.

If we are doomed, let's welcome everyone back into the fold by opening our hearts to each other. I'm not sure I'm ready yet (or able) to include the Monsters in this, but I'm already willing to do so for everyone else, and that's most of us.

And maybe — just maybe — doing this more actively in my session work with clients and my public writing might restore a healthier balance between joy and pain for me or at least give meaning to my personal suffering.

I don't know, but we'll see.