

The Future of America: Why and How We Love Our Parents - Part 1: The Pain

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To be human is to live with a deep well of pain. Human lives inevitably are a collection of care, love, and support, but equally are the management of histories of abuse, fear, insecurity, oppression, betrayal, and indignity. No one, not a soul escapes life in this soup, which is the human condition.

The balance of these two streams of experience, love and support, on the one hand, and pain and indignity on the other are not equal. For some the negatives, the occasions of indignity and humiliation, are rare, in the significant minority. For others, tragically, the balance tips way to the other side. When the scales tips beyond our mental and psychological resources to cope, such lives trip into extremes, whether toward outward directed violence, or toward ways and patterns of self hatred and active investment in self-destruction.

It is our duty as people, both individually and collectively to care, to be attentive, and for each of us to sense when this mix of love and torment slips into dark spaces, where pain and ugliness win the day, and exceed our best efforts to find a noble and honorable face to present each day.

The vast majority (in every class, race, and culture) are protected, and have the basic power to live inside of the God given range of tolerance and courage. For those, even though some or many days truly are hard, we rarely get too close to that edge where pain, loss, and rage take us over and drive us outside the self organization we labor so hard to put together each day.

Each one of us try our best day by day to manage, to carry our personal, unique secret well of pain and not be dragged down to despair or savagery. Each day we summon strength, where we can find it, to put our best foot forward. We want to progress, and not be a burden to others. It's the same work for us all.

And as most of us through our struggles manage to succeed, in this midst of these battles we see others "looking good." And in this seeing "all the others "looking good," is where we are tempted to make our first, really big mistake. We mistakenly are "sure," their life really is fine. I have to struggle to put on my best face, but they? Their life is just, perfectly fine. I only "look" fine. But that is because I successfully manage my struggles against betrayal, hurt, offense, and humiliation. They, on the other hand, look fine because their lives really are fine.

That rich, handsome snob from Harvard, spending carelessly on expensive drinks? His life is fine. Turns out we don't know that he had a brutal, sadistic father, a besotted, avaricious mother, and a childhood of excruciating pain and incessant belittling. No no. He's white. He's rich. He's fine.

That gorgeous young lady, floating with ease through all the lavish attention. Her life too is just fine. We don't know that she was sexually abused by a vile, demonic authority figure through many years of her sweet and innocent childhood. No no. She's white. She's good looking. Her life is fine.

These, quite simply, are our lives. We cope. We want to keep trying. We do not want to be crushed by our struggles, We do not want to burden others. We soldier on. For ourselves, and for each other. For our husbands. For our children. For our co-workers. We soldier on.

This is our shared story. We are human. We live in this soup of pain and joy. We try to win each day, for our own sakes, and for the sake of others. No one can ever say, we are equal in this. Some people have great fortune, and much love in our lives. Moms, Dads, mentors, peers, who truly care, and who are constant in their love for us through thick and thin. A rich white fella might have a truly wonderful life, likewise a poor black kid might have the same. A clean home, a place where my Father respects my mother, a grandma who makes sure I do my homework. Someone who wants me to eat right, and to be right. On the other hand a gorgeous, wealthy young Argentinian girl might have suffered all kinds of horrors despite the enormous privilege afforded her by her parents' wealth. To the naked eye we just cannot tell.

Despite these realities in the life we all share, there is another very important and relevant aspect of living day to day that is bright in demanding our attention just now.

This additional dimension of our shared participation in the human condition relates to the fact of racism.

Racism is just like the indignity and humiliation we all know and all bear in our lives. It is characterized by the inflaming pain of existential injustice, coupled with abject feelings of helplessness that always disembowel us when we are disadvantaged by people with power and privilege over us, and against whom we are all but powerless to act in our own defense.

Yes, the experience of racism is "just like" all such occasions, borne by all people, some more, some less, except that it also is nothing like "all such occasions."

The experience of racism is nothing like all such occasions, because it is, for many of its victims, permanent, constant, relentless, and unyielding. It is for many people a permanent assault on efforts to be decent, to be true, to be better, to be honorable, to play fair, to try our best. It is a guarantee that my best, my humble sincere best, will be violated, suspected, mocked, dismissed, taunted, invaded, condemned, everywhere, all the time, every waking moment of every single day. It is quite simply the whole of life in the world, and not just for me ("I'm fine, I can manage"), but for my mom, for my little brother, and little sister. This is racism. This is painful. This makes playing in this shared work of "managing," and "trying our best" each new day, inexpressibly harder than anyone can explain.

Like all other collections and accumulation of pain, even the quiet, repugnant, constant wash of racism also is "managed," and noble and moving labors of mundane, daily, saintliness generally win the day. The pain, dejection, and struggle is ameliorated by the good people we meet, the good friends we have. By our moms and dads. When the doors to our homes close, and the world is outside, we are in our places where our human dignity is replenished, and hope and encouragement enfold us and put us forth in prayer to soldier on another day.

During the still and quiet years and decades between incidents and outbreaks of rage and protest, we all work hard together to get better and better. And as we try, we actually do get better. Legislation helps. Culture helps. Champions and heroes help.

In these still and quiet stretches of years, people of all races, in a loose bond of gratitude and shared effort, work together to transcend our wrongs and humbly try to improve ourselves. And while trying and overcoming (through efforts that are not proclaimed, and that none will see nor understand) we achieve with each other. We manage small steps toward not only saving the Union, but saving it so as to make and keep it forever worthy of saving. We gingerly step on the edges of trust for one another, and true progress is made.

And here is where the greatest injustice of all lies. We improve together through millions of efforts for years and years. But while it takes millions of efforts to inch forward together, it only takes a single act of evil to blow us all back again into the dark ages, and all trust is shattered. One evil act can undo millions upon millions of good ones. This is not fair.

This happened just now. We all were broken by the murder of our poor, struggling brother George Floyd, trying to turn his life around, snuffed out by a soulless fiend. Derek Chauvin killed a man who'd lost all power, passed out beneath his ugliness too harrowing to see. These eternal eight minutes broke the dam, shredding 100s of millions of our shared and humble efforts to get better all together.

Chauvin broke the dam. Our brother, the late George Floyd broke the dam. Americans of all races, and not only Americans, but people everywhere in the world poured out into the streets in rage and pain. Tragically, this shared pain became instantly hijacked by groups with long established agendas utterly unrelated to the sanctity of black lives, and to our long held dreams for racial equality and harmony.