

Chadley Chadlerson

Ms. Baulch

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Is Suffering Necessary for Inspiration?

One of the most impactful and influential musicians of all time was deaf. Well, to be more precise, he became deaf in his 20s: the peak of his career. His name is Ludwig van Beethoven. As you would expect, Beethoven was devastated when he lost his ability to experience music, which he loved so deeply. He had bouts of depression and suicidal thoughts, but he still continued to write down his ideas knowing that he would never be able to hear them. One would expect that after losing hearing, he would be worse off as an artist. On the contrary, most would say he improved, and the majority of his most famous pieces came after he lost his hearing. Für Elise, Symphony No. 5, and Symphony No. 9—all pieces you have probably heard even if you don't recognize the name—came from Beethoven, who could not hear at all at the time of their writing. So how did Beethoven find the inspiration to write these beautiful pieces of music in his state of deafness? It may in part be his suffering that inspired him to improve his craft and continue to create pieces. As we think of Beethoven's model, we are likely to consider its applicability to our own lives and our own creations. Should we actively seek out suffering in order to find inspiration? Do we need to suffer to be inspired?

To answer that question, it is important to understand inspiration as a concept. Most people have their own idea of what inspiration is: something that causes you to do something else. While this definition is technically correct, it doesn't quite paint the whole picture. According to Merriam-Webster, to inspire is "to draw forth or bring out" ("Inspire," def 3a). This

definition implies that by being inspired, you are "bringing out" something that has always been there. Everyone likely has the capability of being inspired to achieve their goals in their own lives, most just never find a way to "draw it forth". Among many others, one synonym of Inspiration is "vision" ("Inspiration," Thesaurus.com). This synonym is particularly interesting because "vision" tells us where we're going and where we've been. Imagine waking up one day without sight. You may attempt to get out of bed and stumble around for a while before either giving up and going back to bed or somehow trying to get to work or school, but that would be physically impossible. Either way, you would be lost and unable to do anything. Like with vision, we would be lost without inspiration because inspiration gives us purpose. If we are never inspired by anything or anyone, then we will never do anything and ultimately waste our lives.

So if inspiration is so important, where can we find it? To help answer this question, we can look to some of the most creative and inspired people in the world: songwriters. In her song "King", Florence Welch delves into her feelings about the celebrity lifestyle and whether or not it is worth continuing to be a star despite the difficulties. She points out how she "need[s] to go to war to find material to sing" (Welsh). While that line is clearly exaggerated for dramatic effect, it does bring up a strong point. Is hardship necessary for inspiration? For Welch herself, it seems to have helped her. As a celebrity, she has to experience peaks and valleys in life that are hard to comprehend for the average person. She is constantly in the public eye and has to sacrifice so much to remain relevant in current popular culture. For example, in the same song, she considers leaving her life of celebrity behind in order to settle down and start a family but concludes that her fame has made her larger than life and has given her purpose, and thus Florence Welch the celebrity has taken over Florence Welch the normal person in some way. So how does she cope with her unusual circumstances? By getting out all of her feelings in her songs that are heard by

millions. Clearly, suffering or “going to war” as she puts it is necessary for her to find inspiration for her songs.

Few fictional characters exemplify the idea of “going to war” to find inspiration more than Batman. At face value, Bruce Wayne seems to live an ideal life in many people’s eyes. He is a young billionaire with nothing to do except party. Despite this seemingly “perfect” life he could choose to live, he spends his nights fighting crime in Gotham city, risking his life on a nightly basis. Many would see him as a psychopath for making this decision, but his motivations are clear. At a young age, his parents were murdered right in front of him by a common thug in Gotham. He felt the guilt of surviving and doing nothing to save his parents. By cleaning up Gotham of crime, he knows that he is doing all he can to ensure no child has to go through what he was forced to go through. Batman himself says, “It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me” (Nolan). This statement makes it obvious why he risks so much for people who don’t mean that much to him. He wants to measure up to his parents who were great philanthropists, and for whom he feels partly responsible for the death of. By protecting Gotham, he is living up to those high expectations he sets for himself through his adversity-ridden life, turning his unfortunate circumstance into a positive one that helps those around him.

We can use this concept of strength through adversity in our own lives, or we can let it drag us down to becoming worse people. It can be hard to see the value of adversity when we are experiencing it, but if we look back at past hardships, we can easily see how we came out stronger for them. One character in Greek myth who went through incomprehensible hardship was Hercules. Deceived by the jealous goddess Hera, Hercules was driven to kill his family in madness. He was then commanded to atone for his crime by completing the legendary 12 labors (“Hercules: The Life of a Greek Hero”). Hercules was able to bounce back from unspeakable

difficulty and become the most legendary hero in Greek mythology, in part inspired by the tragic murder of his family. He felt the full weight of the act of killing his family, even though he was in a state of madness while doing it. He probably wouldn't have been so quick to want to accomplish the labors if it wasn't for the guilt and subsequent suffering that came along with the death of his family. While hopefully none of us will have to go through the same trauma as Hercules, we can still learn from his determination. It would be understandable if he completely lost the will to live after the death of his family, but he keeps fighting no matter what. His refusal to give up is a major part of what makes him such an inspiring hero. We can read his story and be inspired to push through our own (hopefully less extreme) hardships that we are going through in our own lives. When adversity becomes too much to handle, how can we justify our own suffering?

With so much hardship throughout our own lives, many turn to religion for relief and inspiration. In fact, many religions see suffering as beneficial and leading to growth. Most religions have a higher plane of existence that all believers should strive to get to, such as Heaven or Nirvana. Both Christians and Buddhists believe that life is supposed to be difficult and we must handle adversity to reach "enlightenment". In Christianity specifically, it is believed that "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who[i] have been called according to His purpose" (Holy Bible, Romans 8.28). This verse offers comfort for those who feel like maybe they are not going through life the right way. It reassures them that if they simply trust in God and follow His will, good will be done to them. The philosophy the verse pushes makes the periods of hardship in life easier to bounce back from. While life may seem hard at that moment, the verse suggests living life for God and assures that God will get you out of that rut in life. The suffering may even cause us to rely more on God, making our purpose in life

more clear. However, hardship is not necessarily required to be inspired by faith. Even for this verse specifically, you do not need to have suffered to get the full effect. It is meant to keep life in perspective and ensure that those who are following “His [God’s] purpose,” are doing all they can to be the best people they can be.

Arguably, an even more powerful inspiration than faith is family. We grow up around family, so it makes sense that we get a lot from them, from what we learn, to how we act, and even to small mannerisms. According to Brad Henry, the former Governor of Oklahoma, “Families are the compass that guide us. They are the inspiration to reach great heights, and our comfort when we occasionally falter” (“Brad Henry Quotes”). For most people, our families are a source of nearly unconditional love. Most of the time, they will have our backs and comfort us when we fail. Family is not always so perfect though. Life happens and family can cause more suffering than any other person. Many families are torn apart by a variety of factors. For example, imagine you tell your friend and your sibling a secret that you would hate to be spread around. Would you be more hurt if your friend betrayed your trust or your brother? For most people, I’d bet it’s their brother. However, most people wouldn’t consider their family a great source of suffering in their lives but would consider them a source of inspiration. Ask any child if they are inspired by their parents, and they will likely say yes. Similarly, ask any parents if they are inspired by their children, and they are even more likely to say they are.

One of the most life-changing events in anyone’s life is having children. All of a sudden, there is someone new in this world that they love unconditionally and would do anything for. It may even inspire them to be better people in all facets of their life. An example of a character who completely turned his life around for the sake of his child is Kratos of Sparta, a once vindictive, feared, and rage-filled Greek demigod. After murdering almost the entire Greek

Pantheon out of anger for the death of his family, Kratos traveled to Midgard, one of the nine realms of Norse Mythology, to start a new life. There, Kratos had a son and sought to raise him to be a better man than he used to be. Kratos became a completely different person after his son came into his life; he became controlled, more gentle, and much calmer. In fact, his whole life got much calmer. After being in permanent warfare with the gods of Greece, a more relaxed life with his wife and son was a welcome change. He could put the suffering of his old life behind him. His peaceful life doesn't last forever when the gods of Norse Mythology pick a fight with him because they know of his past. Eventually, he gets wrapped up in an intense battle with Thor. After a long fight, Kratos wins but refuses to finish off Thor because Thor has a daughter, and Kratos believes that she deserves to have her father around. When Thor demands that Kratos finish the fight, Kratos remarks, "For The Sake Of Our Children, We Must Be Better" (Williams). Coming from the same demigod who once slaughtered an entire pantheon, this statement is powerful. Without his son, Kratos would likely still have been suffering daily on a rampage through other lands. After the battle of Ragnarok however, Kratos helps rebuild what was destroyed and for the first time is worshiped instead of feared by the people of the Nine Realms. He is deeply touched by their show of gratitude and knows that it is because of his son that he changed so deeply into a wise and thoughtful god, and the source of this change is that he actually has someone to fight for and protect above all. He desires to be a good role model for his son and by the end, achieves that goal.

But what inspired Kratos to leave Sparta? That's a complicated question but it's safe to assume it took a leap of faith. He knew there was nothing left for him to do in Sparta and had to completely leave his old life behind him. Sometimes a leap of faith is required for us to grow. Frodo leaving the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings* exemplifies this idea perfectly. He didn't want

to leave, and who could blame him? The Shire is almost a utopia. It's a relaxing farming town where there are no worries in the world. Frodo's destiny pushes him elsewhere, however. He is given the ring of power to be destroyed in the huge volcano, Mount Doom, because he is the only one who can resist its tempting allure. So how does he start this journey? With a leap of faith of course. He says, "...I don't want to leave. All the same, I'm beginning to feel that if we've got to go on, then we'd best get it over." His dear friend and traveling companion Sam responds: "It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish, as my old gaffer used to say" (Tolkien 361). Sam brings up an important point. So many people spend so much time thinking about what they're going to do that they never get around to doing anything. Often, impulse decisions lead to better outcomes than decisions that are excessively thought out. Frodo, for example, does set out in the hopes to save Middle Earth despite the dangers that he knows await him. The choice to set out can easily be seen as an impulse decision that Frodo makes here. He could easily make excuses and say that he'll do it later but he doesn't. Up to this point in Frodo's life, he hasn't had much hardship. He has lived in the Shire most of his peaceful life, yet he still is inspired by simply the idea of saving Middle Earth from the evil Sauron. Like Frodo, we can't always wait around for what seems like the "optimal time" to do something. If we are always waiting for the optimal time to do something, then we will never actually get anything done. Frodo didn't have to suffer to be inspired to set out on his quest, he just decided to start his journey and not overthink it. This seemingly simple decision saved the entirety of Middle Earth. Even though our decisions likely will not have the same gravity as Frodo's, we can still learn from him. We can't always wait until we feel like doing something. Sometimes, it just requires a leap of faith.

In theory, taking a leap of faith is a great idea but it can be hard to push ourselves to take that leap. It can be easy to feel depressed and not do anything other than what is absolutely required. In this situation, it may be necessary to change your mindset. “Changing your mindset” is obviously easier said than done, but there are strategies to help. Rachel Feintzeig, a columnist for Wall Street Journal, is “pessimistic by nature, sarcastic and cynical, prone to negative prognostications and insecurities,” which is why she started her own “positivity project.” In order to start such a project, however, she needed advice. She sought out the help of a psychology researcher: “[Michelle] Gielan, the positive-psychology researcher, had some ideas. She prescribed a daily gratitude practice, writing down three new, specific and good things that happened each day.” When she built this practice into her daily routine thinking about such events as “Dwelling on my daughter’s laughter at bedtime or my good luck in catching an earlier train than expected,” she saw her morale at work increase, and she was motivated to get more done while there. All of a sudden the drudgery of her work became more manageable and even enjoyable (Feintzeig). Life can feel boring and hard often. Sometimes, every new day feels like a day of suffering, making us depressed. When suffering leads to depression, it can actually have a major negative impact on how inspired we are. We can overthink our own lives and make it seem like nothing good will ever happen, but there is also so much that happens in life that is wonderful that seems to go under the radar. Feintzeig was simply inspired by the fact that she saw herself as a pessimistic person and wanted to improve. It wasn’t an extreme event in her life that inspired her to change, it was just a desire to become a better person. If Feintzeig can find such a simple source of inspiration, we can also incorporate mental health strategies and try to focus on positives to improve how inspired we feel throughout the day. She even began seeing her coworkers become more bubbly and friendly in her presence. Her positive outlook had a

contagious effect and created a more healthy workplace, which can obviously improve the enjoyability of work but also the efficiency.

The contagious effect of a positive outlook can go beyond the workplace and into everywhere you go. In fact, most attitudes are contagious. It is why a class full of students who don't want to be there or learn can feel so boring and lifeless. It can feel like you are experiencing the compounded boredom of the whole room. Luckily, being positive and inspired can also spread. I noticed this effect in my Sophomore English class with my teacher, Diane Ruth. Her class was always one that I looked forward to and the other students in her class always seemed to be inspired. During an interview with Mrs. Ruth, she said that she noticed that when she brought a positive attitude and was motivated to do her best as a teacher, that attitude spread to her students. My sophomore year overall was not my favorite. Many classes felt like a slog but English class was totally different and I believe I owe that completely to Mrs. Ruth. Where other classes seemed like I had to suffer through boredom just to forget most of what I just "learned", Mrs. Ruth's class somehow found the balance of being fun while still keeping us productive. The other less fun classes left me feeling uninspired, which caused me to be less productive on assignments whereas Mrs. Ruth's class kept me focused. It took me until writing this essay to realize I could've been the change that made my other classes more fun and maybe even spread that positive attitude to the other students. I didn't have to wait until a class with a teacher that was more fun, but I suffered through them anyway instead of changing my mindset: something so simple, yet can make such a positive difference to my mental health and how inspired I am.

Suffering certainly can inspire you, but it is not necessary and in excess, may actually hinder how inspired you are. My brother, who is studying to become a therapist, believes that

you can be inspired by anything as long as you have the internal desire to be inspired (Chadlerson). Even the best advice from the wisest sources can be ignored, while a simple country song can inspire people to do something as impactful as reconnecting with their family. You have to internally want to make a change if you ever want it to happen. When Beethoven slowly began to notice her hearing worsen, he easily could've given up. Maybe he didn't want to be defined by his illness or maybe it was the support of his fans, but Beethoven never gave up. Even today, he is still considered one of the most influential musicians of all time and will likely continue to be placed in such high regard for hundreds of years to come.

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