

Disappointment

I believe that clever people suffer more from disappointment than good people do. Good people have fewer expectations of themselves than clever people. They do not expect to become the Pope or the head of General Motors. Which is not to say these people are not good, just that their attainments are beyond the ken of modest individuals.

Whereas, clever people are set up from adolescence on for a terrible, crushing fall. It may take decades, but clever people eventually come to understand that their high hopes will never be fulfilled.

And thus they carry into the remainder of their lives a wistful sorrow for themselves that threatens their spiritual development.

The typical arc of a clever life is to start out with high hopes, and for various things to happen, usually before age 30, that deliver the news that those hopes are vapor, that they will never come about.

We need to understand the tempting power of disappointment, because it is a special millstone that clever people carry about with them. Until we learn to let it go and fall way from us, there is little hope of advancement.

If you are clever, take out a piece of paper right now, and write down the three moments in your life that most defined you -- that delimited your aspirations. When you have written these, you will likely have three short stories, a triptych of comeuppances that tells much more about you than a comparable set of three happy scenes: the birth of a child, a favorite vacation, the moment you first fell in love.

Because delight is unsustainable, but disappointment is forever, if you want it to be.

And because disappointment is a little death. Like a cloud over the brain, it destroys what it puts in its shade. It occurs to me that the thread underlying ordinary jealousy -- not wanting your beloved to be with anyone but yourself -- is an example of

protecting the life force within us. If we share our love object with someone else, what guarantee do we have of procreating, and cementing our contribution to the gene pool?

So the power of jealousy arises from the fear of being shut out, of the door closing on our dreams. It is an emotion we maximize in ourselves in order to avoid being disappointed in this very key way, the continuance of our genetic thumbprint.

We make fun of jealousy as a sign of immaturity. But really it is the fury of the salmon, splashing up the cascade -- to die, but also to live.

When I was in high school there was this guy from the other side of the tracks -- called Lynn Road in our town. He had it bad for a girl who worked at the local drive-in. When she spurned him, he drove to the front of the big outdoor screen, with all the people's cars pointed right at him, and he took out a pistol and blew his brains out.

That was one of the better horror stories from my high school years. How could you take your life for a bleached blonde named Judy, I used to wonder.

But that guy, whose name was Denny, saw the disappointment coming, and he knew how total it was going to be for him. He was a greaser in a quarry town, who was never going to make it out. Judy was his highest hope. But she had expectations, too.

And even if you don't stand in front of the silver screen and pull the trigger, with everyone pausing a moment with their popcorn, you do anyway. You start to drink, or you stare out the window, or you take something you once gave your best to, and you give up on it instead.

Runners stop running. Poets stop writing poetry. Lovers turn their backs on one another in bed.

Disappointment is the beginning of death, it is the turn in the arc, the sun going down. It is the one wandering cell, that decides to be different and grow. It is the fist that unclenches forever.

And if disappointment rules – these sense that all is irretrievably lost -- God is nowhere.

But here's another clue. The three things that you wrote on the paper, that disappointed you most -- I'll bet you are embarrassed at how mundane they are, how out of proportion they are. They aren't the death of a parent or an economic downturn, or a flood that sweeps your whole town away.

More likely they're a rejection that really hurt, a remark for which there was no comeback, an opportunity which, having sailed, would never pass your way again.

They're about someone looking at the totality of you and saying no -- and you feeling the air go out of you forever.

There are lots of implications here for people's health and growth. Can people overcome disappointment? How? What works?

Clever people, when they have been hurt, are like the ancient mariner who stops everyone on the street to ask these haunted questions. Because they are in half love with their loss, it never occurs to them to ask God.

Here's a personal example. In the 1970s I was a young poet kind during a remarkable technological moment. It was known at that time as the "paper plate revolution," because printing was suddenly dirt-cheap and anyone could put out a literary magazine.

So I got in on the ground level. I was talented, and dramatic, and very surrealistic in style. And I was able to get my work into a lot of these low-budget publications. In a few short years I published perhaps 400 poems in various literary magazines, and several small "chapbooks" of poems.

I wasn't a great poet by any stretch. I had nothing really to say except "Look at me." But I was encouraged by the standards of the day to think that I was destined for great things, literarily.

Well, I wasn't. As I got older, even I got tired of my surrealistic self. I was burned out, bitter, and exceedingly nervous. My doctor suggested yoga meditation. One day, I was meditating, going to the quiet place where meditators go, I began speaking to the silence -- and the silence spoke back to me!

It was like a voice by the waters. All it did was announce its presence, say Hello to me. But it really freaked me out. I had the awful feeling that I had had a face-to-face with God.

Here's the odd thing. That ultra-strange moment killed me for surrealism. I never again could write about lamprey sandwiches, or the nipple of the moon. It seemed too concocted. I became desperate instead to learn more about this voice. I was fascinated that there was something else in there besides my own wits. In all the years since, my wits have never again seemed adequate.

The truth of the Voice I heard underscored the untruth of my voice.

Not that I reacted in a wise or mature way. Hello, no. My reaction was crushing disappointment. I wasn't about to knuckle under to some voice in a cave. Not until I had had a good long cry -- about 25 years long.

For the life of me, I could not get over my sadness at this revelation -- that God was God and I was not. I couldn't give up on my dream, even though I knew it was hopeless. A new anthology was being put together, and I sent them some work. But the magical "economic" moment of chap publishing had passed. Standards -- urk! -- were again being imposed. My work came back rejected.

Now, you have to be a poet to know that regional anthologies come along only every decade. I was in my 30s by this time, and I realized that, by being invisible into my 40s, my poetry career was, effectively dead. I could write, but I would not be seen as part of The Gang of 20 That Matter. The kool kids. The literati. The people who get invited to do stuff.

This will seem totally silly to you. Being a poet is no career. What do they make, maybe \$500 a year on poems alone. It was the identity I craved. It was belonging. It was feeling *special*.

This stupid rejection broke my heart.

And what makes it so stupid is that I had everything in the palm of my hand, when I went spelunking in my meditation, and chanced upon a friendly spirit.

Had I been wise, I might have saved 25 years of disappointment. Those years might have been years of service, of happiness, of meaning. Instead – sploosh – I flushed ‘em away feeling sorry for myself. And put my family through all that self-pity.

And what might the Voice have been trying to say to me? That I was just a part of all that was around me, not its chronicler. That the role of poet I created for myself was a self-deception, a way not of seeing the world in the very act of insisting I was seeing it better than anyone else.

Everyone else would die, but my words would live on.

Ugh.

Friends, disappointment feels good, in a sad way. Do not give in to it. When you find yourself moping, see it for what it is. It is not your friend, your consoler. It is your worst enemy, and if you go on like this, you will never hear the voice of God.