



Bearing Disappointment

*Growing Resilience As A  
Maturational Process*



## **The Importance of Bearing Disappointment As a Means Towards Becoming More Resilient**

*adapted from the work of Ian Craib  
by Michael Mervosh  
for the 'Navigating the Unknown'  
Ensemble Hero Journey*



*Always check your inner state  
with the lord of your heart.*

*Copper does not know it's copper,  
until it is changing into gold.*

*Your loving does not know its majesty,  
until it knows its helplessness.*

*Rumi*



There is much about our modern world that increases disappointment, and at the same time encourages us to hide from it, and to act as if what is good in life does not include the bad.

For example, modern people can cling to beliefs that:

- *We can love and be loved by another person without having to give up other aspects of our lives.*
- *We can have children without making sacrifices for them.*
- *We can love without ambivalence and hatred.*
- *We can make decisions about our lives without being bounded on all sides by the needs and actions of others.*
- *We can grow without pain and loss.*
- *In the end, we can grow without facing death.*

The premise of successfully navigating the unknown is that we can only make life better if we can recognize and incorporate the darker sides of life, such as disappointment and death.

Paradoxically, the more we deny this reality, the more difficult our lives become, and the more we become involved in breaking the links between people.



Living into the Hero's Journey myth has something important to offer, but that something often runs counter to the expectations people have about what it takes to change, and what people might hope to gain from a meaningful journey, and how to think about the wider culture and society in general – especially as we navigating the thin line between staying safe at home and venturing into the world during a global pandemic

- *Entering the Hero's Journey myth will require us to examine and re-think our unquestioned assumptions and expectations of ourselves and of the world.*

There is always a number of complex and contradictory processes going on within the self. As mature adults, we realize that nothing is ever simply 'good' or 'bad'; and most things are at the same time good and bad.

The anatomy of disappointment teaches us that our wishes, desires, hopes and expectations have limits and boundaries. We have to learn to honor and respect this fact, in order to reconcile and adapt ourselves to what life has to offer us.

**Disappointment** is what happens, and what we feel, when something we expect, intend, or hope for does not materialize.

- *We cannot do everything that we want to do.*

Disappointment is what we feel when something we expect, intend, hope for or desire does not materialize.



## DESIRE

The most basic motivational force that we have as human beings is **desire** – needing urgently, yearning, to the point of almost willing something into existence.

Sometimes we desire something so completely that we will revert to our infantile, demanding selves and scream for it. Sometimes we will break things, threaten to hurt (or actually hurt) ourselves, and others, in order to secure the object of our desire.

We all have desires, whether we like it or not.

On the inside, it is not a matter of simply wanting something, but needing it so urgently, that without it, life seems unbearable.

*“If I yearn hard enough, long enough, if I feel this pain sufficiently and intensely enough, then my desire will be realized.”*

Most of us learn to eventually survive the disappointments of desire, with a lot of heartache.

We learn to accept that what we desire does not always exist; and if it does exist, we can't always have it. We can desire something without necessarily hoping for it, and certainly without expecting it.

But sometimes, we believe something should happen simply because we desire it to happen, and we find ourselves unable to give up our desire for an outcome, despite all the evidence to the contrary that we are presented with. (“*So and so is really the right one for me!*”) Such insistent beliefs are not a result of insanity, and not the reaction to some trauma, but still do not quite stand the test of ‘reality’.

Often, there is also certain social processes going on around us that make reality testing about our desires more difficult, and that perhaps encourage us to believe that what we desire should always be realized.

We may often be led to believe that we can always achieve personal fulfillment without the risk of a fiasco; make the space for personal reflection and self-expression without having to be courageous or risk; and expect to obtain the personal growth that we desire – and often times, without any negative consequences, and at no personal cost.

- *We have desires, whether we like them or not.*
- *Desire is not the same as hope.*



There is a tendency to turn our needs, wishes and hopes into *infantile demands* whenever they are bound up by an underlying sense of omnipotence. Then, when these needs go unmet, people feel free to rage against a world that will not be what they want it to be.

This tends to be an avoidance of the following disappointment:

- *I spend my life surrounded by other people who are more or less independent of me, and they are constantly doing things on their own account, independent of my wishes.*

The pursuits of personal fulfillment, self-expression and spiritual enlightenment can maintain infantile fantasies of omnipotence, grandiosity, and satisfaction without effort.

The very powerful idea and possibility of self-expression in deeper relatedness with the world around us needs careful examination, and has to be balanced against considerations for others. *(For example, marital affairs.)*

Cultural pressures having to do with wanting to help people, to ease suffering, to be effective, to be good at our jobs, etc. – can make us vulnerable to our own denial of the necessity and inevitability of human suffering – and the disappointments this invariably brings.

When we deny our disappointments as evolving human beings, we can construct blueprints of what people (or ourselves) *ought* to be feeling, *ought* to be like, and we can too easily set about trying to manipulate or even force people (or ourselves) into these blueprints – making them into cut outs of ‘gingerbread people’.

Any crucial commitment to anything worthwhile must involve at the very least an ability to embrace something that isn’t perfect, and to risk the loss of what has been embraced.

It involves facing the inevitable loss of the idealized object, for the gain of the one that is actually there. This can be quite hard to bear.



*“The difference between a mature and an immature person lies in an ability to acknowledge the existence of psychological vulnerability without claiming that it invalidates everything or anything the person might say. The person is deeply in touch with the sense of being at risk and deeply in touch with the knowledge that is possible for each of us to go mad.”*

- Sherry Turkle



In this way, entering into your own hero’s journey cannot and must not be considered as a guarantee or even a guide to “a good life”; or as a cure that is bound to work; or as an ever-available bringer of relief from pain and anxiety; or as a way of assuring personal change - although something of all or any of these might inevitably result.

The maturational process we go through on our journey can only happen and deepen by exerting the necessary effort and risk of the work it actually takes. If we have a realistic idea of what a mythic journey is truly about, and we are prepared to undertake the potential benefits and risks of an authentic exploration of the unknown, and can accept the limits and boundaries of any exploratory ground – then we can allow the unexpected adventures and ordeals happen to us – life on life’s terms.

Psychological development depends on *'staying in the fire'* to the point where we begin to understand our painful disappointments, and find that they might actually be bearable, and that they might even be useful, in some vital, peculiar and unforeseen way. This is the real function of an ordeal.

Perhaps in some other age, this might have simply been called 'life'.

Thinking about the possibility as well as the unavailability of disappointment at some point along our journey – and considering how we ourselves may be disappointments to our friends and family, and wondering how we might be able to address this inevitability, keeps us from indulging false hopes and futile promises of a fix or a 'cure'- which would only leave the real 'working through' process to some other point in time.

An authentic hero's journey can be viewed as a process of learning to be who you really are, when neither the journey itself, nor becoming yourself, is necessarily a comfortable experience, and there is no guarantee-able outcome to the necessary risks we must take.

The complexity required of any such experience always produces some form of *ambivalence*.

Learning how to willingly enter the unknown, and while experiencing the vulnerability that comes from this inner territory – we can learn new ways to activate love. This will require of us a willingness to suffer for whatever is genuinely worthwhile. It is what Joseph Campbell often said was the *'joyful participation in the sorrows of the world'*.



- *"Madness is being unable to find anybody who can withstand you."*  
- John Rickman

As helpers of any kind, we need to respect another person's journey – which includes tolerating someone's troubles and resulting symptoms, and in fact, we must even respect their particular way of madness, and what might be the impossibility of 'cure', and sometimes, of even a significant improvement of their circumstances.

At times, the deep uncertainty of whether or not change can happen must be endured. The deep work of the unknown must be tolerated when there seems to be no end to someone's suffering. When we can accompany another in their suffering, and especially with those who suffer greatly, it allows for that person to not grow worse, and maintain the functionality they have, as they suffer.

For some portion of our journey, a realistic aim is to respect and allow our symptoms and our suffering to be, when in the past we (and others) have refused to accept and allow it. This ultimately leads to self-rejection. It can be very challenging to respect someone's genuine suffering as a choice which might be, in proper context, their best choice.

The denial of disappointment is then, double-sided:

- *We might deny it because we cannot stand the suffering of others; because then, I would have to accept my own suffering as well.*
- *We might deny it because we cannot tolerate our own sense of failure, our inability to achieve we set out to do – alleviate the other's suffering.*

When we as companions cannot bear disappointment ourselves, we will tend to become prescriptive in our interventions with those we care about, and our attempts to help will be self-serving. Then we inadvertently turn our companions into 'gingerbread' cut outs of people – that the culture at large seems to need.

For example:

Having a baby, getting married, being promoted at work – all of these good things often bring unexpected feelings of loss and depression – which in many cases are quite appropriate, since they involve the loss of situations and relationships that will never return.



*“A patient in psychotherapy does not literally return to childhood to unlearn the self-destructive pattern he evolved in growing up, although he might engage in much regressive experimentation in order to undo that negative learning.*

*What is essential is that he be able to relinquish his attachment to his pathway – be able to say to himself: “I have wasted X years in a painful and useless pursuit; this is sad, but I know have an opportunity to try another approach.” This is hard for people to do.*

*There is a strong temptation to rationalize our wrong turnings as a necessary part of development (“it taught me discipline”), or to deny that we participated fully in them (“that was before I became enlightened”).*

*Giving up these two evasions always leads to despair, but as Alexander Lowen points out, **despair is the only cure for illusion**. Without despair we cannot transfer our allegiance to reality – it is a kind of mourning period for our fantasies.*

*Some people do not survive this despair, but no major change within a person can occur without it.”*

- Philip Slater  
*Earthwalk*

