

The Taste of Self-Respect

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It was a hot July afternoon. For reasons I cannot recall, my older sister, two of our friends and I had challenged each other to jump from the balcony to the grass below. But I was scared. I did not want to throw myself from a height of almost seven feet. I could see that the other girls wanted me to follow them, but I could not move. Having carefully seated myself on the parapet, I dangled my legs over the soft, green grass of the lawn below. My sweaty hands were so fiercely clutching the stone fence that my knuckles were becoming white. I had a vexing little voice in my head telling me I did not have to do it; I could go back to the balcony if I chose.

Under the midday summer sun, though, my resoluteness started to melt into a hot confusion of haunting thoughts. The vexing voice telling me not to jump scattered into a multiplicity of contradictory questions I could not answer. Could I jump safely like the other girls had, or would I hurt myself? Was it normal to be so scared, or was I simply a coward? Slowly, I started to push myself forward just to shut up that vexing voice. My tights rubbed painfully against the rough stone as I approached its edge, but I let myself fall. In a moment, the reassuring feeling that my balance would allow me to change my mind and pull myself back disappeared: my hands slipped from their secure position; my arms followed. I fell on the lawn on one foot, spraining my ankle and hitting my elbows against the grass, which was by no means as soft as it had looked.

A second later, I was in tears. I cried because I was hurt, but also, more important, because I was ashamed of having hurt myself as I had feared. Recalling that day, I have often asked myself why I jumped, despite my reasonable doubts. Why did I hurt myself doing something I knew I did not want to do? The answer is not an easy one, and I did not find it for years. As a seven-year-old with a very limited capacity to evaluate the consequences of my decisions, I was lacking a certain moral weight that would have held me to the balcony, something stronger than a desire to please my sister or to prove my own bravery.

The ability to weigh our real desires and distinguish them from the ephemeral aspirations of others is difficult to pin down. It has subtle shades that can escape our attention. Sometimes it is called moral strength, sometimes character, sometimes nerve. In her essay “On Self-Respect,” Joan Didion simply calls it self-respect. She shows us that we tend to underestimate the importance of having it. First, she points out a common misunderstanding, explaining that respecting oneself has nothing to do with having an unstained reputation, a strict moral code, or a life without difficulties. In her view, “it has nothing to do with the face of things, but concerns instead a separate peace, a private reconciliation” (570). It is not the abstention from what could make other people shake their heads and say we cannot possibly “respect” ourselves, but the positive action of making choices—even contemptible ones—and standing up for them. People with self-respect “have the courage of their mistakes. They know the price of things” (570). If they do something, they do it because they really want to do it, and if it turns out to be a mistake, they acknowledge their fault and are ready to accept the consequences. This acceptance rooted in purpose is something I lacked when I jumped from the balcony and cried, pitying myself and blaming my pain on my sister and friends. My sister respected herself: she wanted to jump, she did it, she was happy with it. My jump, even being a rough copy of hers, was just the opposite. I jumped against my will and pitied myself for the consequences.

If I go back in my mind to that day, however, I must admit that saying I jumped against my will is not exactly true. Nobody kicked me down. I had two options, stay or jump, and I went for the one that seemed easier to me at that moment: emulating my sister. It seemed easier, even though this choice implied doing something I would normally have been too scared to do. The event reminds me why Didion insists that “to have that sense of one’s intrinsic worth which constitutes self-respect is potentially to have everything: the ability to discriminate, to love and to remain indifferent” (571). Her essay suggests that acquiring self-respect is a matter of being able to understand our fears, our abilities, our limits, and ourselves, so that we can make decisions based on who we are and what we really want.

Yet even though respecting oneself can lead to living a happier life, it does not guarantee a life free of trouble. Self-respect does not prevent us from making mistakes and putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations; it allows us to judge and act with confidence. As Didion asserts, self-respect is not “a kind of charm against snakes, something that keeps those who have it locked in some unblighted Eden, out of . . . trouble in general” (570). Failing

to respect oneself is an undesirable option because it feels deeply wrong; as Didion explains, “to live without self-respect is to lie awake some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital, and the sleeping hand on the coverlet, counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken, the gifts irrevocably wasted” (570). If we lack self-respect, we can give the right weight to neither our present options nor our past and future decisions and mistakes. Every single step ends up looking like something to regret; we lose confidence in our judgment, and learn nothing from our mistakes.

After hearing Didion’s account, it would be natural to want to acquire self-respect for ourselves. It would be natural to reread her essay, looking for a way to attain it. That would be a long search, though, because Didion does not answer the question for us. She does not—cannot—because self-respect is not a moral code or a set of universal, fixed rules. It is a stance that allows us to make more objective and satisfying judgments; it is not binding in any sense and, as with any ability, it needs practice to develop. It does not require or call for an instruction manual. It is a matter of losing such erroneous certainties. It can be painful, too, as the only real way we can come to respect ourselves is through sticking to our decisions to see where they lead us, instead of cowardly shrinking back from our responsibilities as soon as our tongues touch the bitter taste of possible failure.

When I emulated my sister’s jump, I stepped back from my unique responsibility to ask myself what I should really do; I refused to deal with my conscience and made the wrong decision. The moment I realized my failure, all I did was cry; all I could sense was the sharp aftertaste of my fiasco. But whether I knew it or not, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was also already asking myself a common question: *why on earth did I jump?* It is only now, looking back at that time among other memories, other decisions, that I can begin to understand what triggered the jump. Now I can see how peer pressure chopped my reasonable fears into a flurry of questions. Step by step, mistake after mistake, I have gotten to know myself well enough to *really* be able to realize what would have been better for me.

Respecting ourselves, according to Didion, is the natural next step that follows a real understanding and acceptance of who we are and what we want. But she also admits that “to be driven back upon oneself is an uneasy affair at best,” even though it is “the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect” (569). We must stop deceiving ourselves, as we do when we try to rejoice in “apparent triumph[s] which involved no real effort” or “seemingly heroic act[s] into which one had been shamed” (569). We must decide every

day what we had better say *no* to, and, on the other hand, also what we can say *yes* to. This is a daily ritual that takes dedication and resistance, because every day brings new challenges. We have to be ready to fight the feeling that “every encounter demands too much, tears the nerves, drains the will” (571).

In his essay “Yes,” Brian Doyle leads us through the different choices he has made throughout his life, assessing their positive and negative consequences and the fear that accompanied them. Saying *yes* to life every day, Doyle accepted his responsibilities and a diverse set of experiences, including courting the woman who became his wife, getting married, taking care of his three children, and studying the Gaelic language. Doyle can live happily thanks to his love for his family, which is stronger than his fear of the difficulties that inevitably come with parenthood. He acknowledges that sources of happiness can turn into sources of sorrow. Doyle’s children are his greatest joy, but the idea that something bad could happen to them is a constant worry, and he confesses that sometimes “in the wee hours of the night when up with one or another of the little people,” he finds himself “wondering what it might have been like not to have so many” (701). He explains, however, that escaping these fears is not the solution for a satisfactory life, because refusing to face a fear means also missing the bliss that comes with what causes it. Doyle knows that without his three babies, life “would have been lonely” (701); he also knows that parenthood is a choice with serious consequences that he must, if he is to be a parent, accept.

Like my seven-year-old self, Doyle had two options, but he was able to see them clearly and judge the real difference between them. The easy but not really satisfactory option was never to have children; the more difficult but much more rewarding other one was deciding to be the father of three. But we would be oversimplifying if we proclaimed that Brian Doyle has self-respect just because he had the strength to pick this second option. His self-respect does not manifest itself in merely the first moment of his choice, but in his ability to repeat that decision every day, when every new day brings new dreads. If he had no self-respect, maybe he would regret his choice. He would miss the beauty of the moments his family gives him because he would be too busy trying to reconcile himself to the missed opportunity. But he has self-respect. The willingness to taste both the bitter and the sweet in life is why Doyle can really go on living, saying “yes . . . to [the] rich cheerful chaos that leads” him “sooner to the grave and happier along that muddy grave road” with “absolute surprise and with unbidden tears,” saying *yes* to life every single day (701).

Doyle's example suggests that keeping one's life within a careful selection of only the situations, responsibilities, or opinions that afford no struggle or suffering is taking the easy, inauthentic and ultimately meaningless way out. Doing only what other people think we should do could be described, in Doyle's language, as saying *no* to ourselves. We might be happy at first, but end up as Didion warns, "at the mercy of those we cannot but hold in contempt" (571); we are not really living authentic lives. The life we choose to avoid failures is likely to include failures anyway, "each defeat generating fresh despair at the urgency of divining and meeting the next demand made upon us" in a vicious circle from which it is not easy to escape (571). When I jumped from the balcony, I was trying to be someone more like my sister than myself, but, of course, I could not be such a person. Even before sitting on the parapet I already knew I would not be able to emulate her jump, but I did not have the courage to acknowledge it before I let myself fall. I chose not to face the possibility of appearing as a coward and a failure in front of her, and I ended up failing myself. When I silenced the vexing voice in my head telling me I could not jump, I suffocated the self-respect that was trying to make me see all the paths opening in front of me.

A solid and real appeasement with ourselves, one that permits us, as Didion would like, to "say *no* without drowning in self-reproach" can only be found, if we trust Doyle's example, by looking more and more deeply into our conscience every day (571). If we return, with confidence, to the decisions we've made and the decisions we have to make, our own true perspective will never be stifled by the general view. We must learn to *feel* the happiness that life can bring us, if only we say *yes* to it.

We have to remember again and again that the initial pain we feel when "stripped of the delusion that one likes oneself," can in retrospect seem "the one condition necessary to the beginnings of real self-respect" (Didion 569). All of us possess self-respect in theory; the problem is that we do not *feel* that it is there and therefore do not use it. We waste our ability instead of exercising it, as we do with muscles if we never use them. At first, making decisions based on self-respect is painful, as Didion admits. When she first lost her self-deceiving "conviction that lights would always turn green for" her, she was "unnerved," terrified, disappointed (569). The trauma was so sharp that, years later, she could still "recall with embarrassing clarity the flavor of those particular ashes" that accompanied the end of her "innocence" (569). For her as for everyone, it takes tremendous motivation to hold to one's choice. Where do we find that motivation? We build it, attempt after attempt. We become acquainted over time with that addictive feeling. Once you have experienced

the perfectly sweet sensation of living according to your nature, the taste of failing yourself becomes acrid and impossible. At the outset, being loyal to yourself also tastes a little bitter, but as you develop your palate you realize that the best tastes are yet to come. This is why Doyle can end every day with a *yes* on his lips. This is why, I believe, if I could go back to being that seven-year-old, nothing on earth could drag me away from the sweet satisfaction of staying aloft, held up by nothing but a force of will.

WORKS CITED

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