



Sitting on Your Very Own Pity Potty

Author unknown

“Don’t bother me; I’m feeling sorry for myself. It’s an all-consuming task. I don’t have time for trivia, for your problems, for anything but a crisis. Feeling sorry for myself is all about me-me-me.”

Self-pity is seldom deserved, never useful; and after all, what do most Americans have to complain about? The majority of us have a roof over our heads and food in the cupboard. Our nation is not at war.¹ There are no spies in our living rooms.

After all, life is suffering. No one makes it much past the first hours of existence without feeling hungry and cold, alone and afraid. But, as soon as we are conscious enough to put words to our misery, we want to wail, “Why me?” and then continue to whine.

When in the midst of a pity party and my humor tries to reassert itself, a ditty arises: “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, guess I’ll eat some worms.”² Self-pity is a

¹ Evidently this was written when the US was not at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, or is referring to civil war.

² New lyrics to the old song “Polly Wolly Doodle All Day,” as sung by the British band “The Boys” in 1977. The origins of the lyrics are unknown.

worm-like emotion. It burrows in. It wriggles in. It makes little compost heaps of indulgence. And soon, there is a place to wallow. The words go together: self-pity and wallow. You wallow in self-pity because it blocks all else. You are covered with it; it’s in your eyes, in your ears, refusing any countering information.

What has self-pity ever done for you or me? Has it ever urged you to greater achievements? Endearred you towards friends and family? Inspired you to improve the lot of humankind? When we wallow, it is in selfishness. Self-pity asks, “Why me? And why not her?”

Self-pity assumes that your portion should always be good; when it’s not, some terrible mistake has been made. That is because self-pity is self-serving. There is a human “need” to complain and to have the worst complaint; the one that makes others stop and reconsider their woes. It seems rather odd to want to be the most pitiable, the one with the greatest suffering, but that’s because self-pity requires attention from yourself and from others.

It is so tempting, as my mother puts it, to “sit on the pity potty.” It does seem to be a need. But, self-pity is a “need” to be resisted, because self-pity is all about self. It is selfish. It requires that your entire focus be on yourself and your past. You tend to focus not only on what inspired your current self-pity, but on all wounds ever incurred—and to poke and prod until they too hurt again—to reexamine and reassert yourself.

“Self-pity is easily the most destructive of the nonpharmaceutical narcotics; it is addictive, gives momentary pleasure, and separates the victim from reality.” That summary is from John W. Gardner, president of the Carnegie Foundation, a founding chair of Common Cause, and Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. He also said, “Storybook happiness involves every form of pleasant thumb-twiddling; true happiness involves the full use of one’s powers and talents.” I would add to that, “and service to others.”

The antidote of self-pity is obvious: get outside of self. Some people apply this antidote in a very weak form. They hear about someone whose problems seem worse than their own, and cheer up. They think, “See, someone

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is worse off than me,” and this comparison seems to lighten the load. But this is not far removed from wishing ill on others.

True compassion does not contain self-interest. It steps outside that narrow jail cell. Compassion requires that we feel the suffering of others as if it were our own. It requires empathy, which is directed toward understanding others. It requires love which radiates outward. It requires rejoicing in others’ successes, which is opposite of self-interest or selfishness. This is the true antidote of self-pity.

Get up. Get out. Look outward. Do something for someone else. Helen Keller said, “Self-pity is our worst enemy, and if we yield to it we can never do anything wise in the world.” ~