



Being (and not being) with pain

by Rick Belden

I've been thinking a lot about pain lately, particularly pain of the emotional and psychological variety, and I've come to realize that a lot of my problems and failures as a young man resulted from my inability to be with my own pain. Not that I could have known how to be with it. To the contrary, I was taught and conditioned to run from it and to ignore it, as it seems most of us were, and still are.

A couple of months ago, I was real sick for about a week with some sort of horrible cold/flu/whatever. After a few days, I began to realize that being sick as a dog, while not pleasant, was giving me a much-needed opportunity to slow down so I could remember and relearn how to be with myself again. And that aspect of being sick, once the realization kicked in for me, was sweet. A big part of that sweetness was remembering and re-experiencing what it was like to be with my body, moment to moment, without any agenda or any schedule. I'd had a similar experience in the last few months of 2009 when I was in the acute stages of dealing with a broken wrist and shoulder, but the nature of that experience was different. It was extreme. What I rediscovered while I was sick for a week was more of an everyday mode, the mundane "being with myself" that is needed for common experiences, like a bad cold. Or a bad day.

I'm having a lot of bad days lately, and I've been struggling to come up with a good way to deal with that issue. While driving to the pizza place recently one night after work (pizza and a brownie being my most favored self-medication and after-work sedative for

the past few years), I was thinking about what else I could do to numb the painful after effects of these meaningless, seemingly endless, unrelentingly dreadful days at work. And I realized almost immediately that no amount of pizza or sex or TV or porn or drinking or drugs or overeating, nothing I've ever done in the past or could ever do in the future to try to numb myself and escape, would make that awful pain I feel at the end of every wasted day go away, because what I'm feeling is the pain of another lost day in my unlived life.

That was, and is, a sobering realization, one that has left me with a problem that is not easy to solve and a question that is not easy to answer:

How do I live with my pain?

I know I'm not alone in wrestling with this issue. I know that a lot of folks feel stuck in lives they didn't see coming. They begin each day filled with dread and end each day filled with regret. They want to change their circumstances, but can't, for all kinds of reasons. When I was younger, I used to tell others, "If you don't like your life, change it." I believed that, and I lived by it. I'm not saying I don't believe it now, but I can also see now that life isn't always so simple, or the path to change so direct. Sometimes life just piles up on people and boxes them in, sometimes as a result of their own choices, sometimes as a result of the system and the times in which they live, and sometimes as a result of chance, or fate, or karma, or whatever term you prefer for the mysterious and often apparently random hand of cosmic force in our lives.

I am where I am in my life as a result of all of the factors and influences listed above. I feel trapped in a losing game, and every instinct I have tells me to free myself and run for the life I want. But the way to freedom remains unclear, and the gap between my inner vision and my material reality is the distance between the life I want and the life I seem able to have. So I string my meaningless workdays together like a set of bad pearls and hope I can use them to buy myself some time somewhere down the road. Good strategy going forward, perhaps, but it does almost nothing in the now to diminish the pain of losing another day, and another, and another ...

The Sufi poet Rumi wrote, "The cure for pain is in the pain." My experience tells me that this is true. I also know that embedded within every painful time and experience in my life has been the seed of great transformation and healing, not just of circumstances, but of self. And yet I resist. I want no more pain. I want to be done with it.

Sadness scares me. Grief, the experience of grief and grieving, scares me. I've written about this in the past (["falling through"](#)). But I also know that grieving, that being with grief and sadness, is one of the most powerful and effective ways of being with and transforming pain. When I let my grief and my sadness speak, when I allow those energies to stir in my belly and my chest, to move up through my heart and my throat,

to enter the world as tears and moans and sobbing and wailing, I am cleansed. I am lifted. I can see again. I feel real again. Human.

But entering that process is challenging for me. It's tricky. Sensitive. I almost have to be taken by surprise. Like so many men, I've been conditioned not to feel such things (not directly anyway) and certainly not to express them, not even privately. The messages are clear: "Be a real man. Take charge. Control yourself. Don't cry. Be tough. Don't be a wimp." If you are a man who is suffering, keep it to yourself. If you have to feel something, feel angry. Anger is manly and therefore safe to feel. Grief and sadness are not.

Grief work is hard for many of us as men, and so much has to be learned (and unlearned) in order to do it. You have to be tough and soft at the same time, and you have to be present with what you're feeling without losing yourself in the intensity of it. It's not easy. Healing is not for wimps. The real tough guys are the ones who can do the work, and if you don't do your work when you're called to do it, something bigger will come along and crack you wide open. None of us is immune to these processes.

I know, I can feel, that there is a lake of grief dammed up inside me now about the life I haven't lived, and that I won't be living tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day. It frightens me, but I hope I can find a way to let it begin to move through me soon, because that's the best way I know to be with, and live with, my pain.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).