HOPE

"We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

It's curious to me how some people arrive with stunning ease and immediacy at the realization that they can change their own lives and become agents of positive change generally, and others simply can't imagine themselves in either role.

I have been reminded every time I speak to a group that the circumstantial differences in people – where they are in life and what they do for a living and what kinds of experiences they've had – do not predict how they respond to the idea of their own natural ability to have an increasingly better quality of life. I have been reminded every time I hear a person's story that the magnitude of the obstacles they've faced and the significance of the failures they've had do not influence their faith and confidence in their own innate strengths. Successful people who have little in their way and rarely fail are neither more nor less likely than unsuccessful people who are bound in despair and accustomed to failure to realize their untapped resiliency and power to find ever greater peace and enjoyment in life.

But what is the difference, then, that separates the people who grasp for and are enthralled by the promise of their own innate capacities and the people who turn from and argue against that promise? How is it that some people cry out how much they long for a sense that they can mold and shape their lives, and yet, when offered a simple means to discover that essential artistry, turn away and say, "No, not me; I can't." How is it that some people demand to be left alone with things "just fine" as they are, and yet, when touched to the core by the realization that there is always more beyond "just fine," decide they can do anything and there are no limits?

We could make up a thousand questions and a thousand answers. More and more, though, it has seemed to me that we take action or take a stand in life and afterwards come up with the logic that supports it. In my own experience, for example, I will most often just decide something on the spot – make a promise, plan to attend an event, agree to meet someone, pick up a book, commit to an idea – and then I'll wonder why I did that. My mind is quick to come up with explanations, none of which even crossed my mind when I made the decision. Making up the explanations, though, makes the decision seem more weighty and important in the world – sometimes gives it meaning, sometimes crushes it under a pile of pointless justifications. And I've learned over time that I am easily disappointed if I've made a big mental case for something, and then it doesn't work out. If I haven't made a big mental case for it, if I've just embraced the fact that it made sense to me as a good thing to do, but *who knows*, I can learn from it, adapt flexibly within it,

and leave it behind when it's over, whether it is a colossal success, an inconsequential event, or a major failure.

So the first simple answer that occurs to me is that the more we develop or accumulate a lot of extraneous thinking around an idea that simply seemed obvious to us at one point in time, the more tentative we become about the idea, the more concerned we become about its outcome, and the less we can embrace both negative and positive results and keep learning. So one difference could be a difference between people's stances towards ideas, whether we over-think them and worry about them, or attach our self-image to them, or bury them in minutia -- or ride them out and stay open to learn from them and see what happens. The question here is how tightly are our expectations tied to our own logic and reason and self-image. How much does experience in our personal world affect our freedom to choose, and choose again?

An example: A doctor I know had started to lose patients, so he had the idea that he needed to create a more patient-centered facility. He immediately decided that, although this was his inspiration, he didn't know enough to come up with his own version of what would be patient-centered. So he gathered advisors and developed a lot of data, including information about the layout of the space, the amenities in the waiting room, the comfort of the examining rooms, the colors of the walls, the kinds of music to play. You name it. A new location was selected after careful demographic analysis of his patient base, so that it was central and easily accessible. Not long after this dream facility opened, he began losing more patients. He was devastated. He resented his patients for not being more appreciative of the careful thinking that had gone into the new facility. He lost even more patients. When I met with him, he was ready to quit practice because he was discouraged and heading for financial ruin. If this didn't work out, what in the world would work out? What more could he have done to please these ingrates?

I asked him what had given him the idea to be more patient-centered in the first place. "I don't know," he said. "I just got a gut feeling that my patients weren't satisfied and something was missing. I wanted to try to fill that gap for them."

"Did you ever ask the patients?" I asked. He said, "No, I consulted people who are experts in patient-centered facilities. I figured the experts would know."

We polled his patients. It turned out he had gotten very busy and the patients missed the contact they used to have with him and his staff when his practice first opened. The office had become mechanized and impersonal; there was a lot of front office turnover and new people. In his specialty, patients developed a long-term relationship with the practice, and they felt alienated from the closeness they had enjoyed with him and his staff. The new office, much larger and more efficiently designed, employing more temporary people and more sophisticated technology, simply exacerbated the patients' dissatisfaction, since it

was not related to the facility in the first place, but rather to the feeling, tone, and quality of the doctor-patient relationship.

This information sent the doctor into a tailspin of anger, discouragement and disappointment. He had just spent a huge sum of money to solve the wrong problem. For a few days, he bounced between anguish and embarrassment. He described himself to me as "hopeless." We talked about that. "Hopeless" meant to him that he was just too stupid to be in his own practice. Hopeless meant that he couldn't see his way clear. He didn't know how to connect with his patients and keep them happy while growing his practice so that he could meet his obligations. He didn't know how to dig out of the financial hole. He didn't know how to recover his enthusiasm. He didn't know how to stop beating himself up over his mistakes.

He was fighting a "finite disappointment" that he just could not accept. This never changed for him, and, at the time, I had no idea how to be of assistance to him except by helping him develop a business strategy that worked out satisfactorily. Personally, he never regained the energy, joy and exuberance he had had when he started to practice. He toiled at his trade diligently, counting the years to retirement. His expectations were always chained to reasons, and he stopped expecting things to be good for him for the reason that he failed spectacularly, once, the first time he ever tried anything big. He was afraid to let himself imagine a fresh start, the possibility of success, the renewal of passion for his practice.

In one sense, this story is superficial. After all, there are far greater problems in the world than a doctor who almost put himself out of business with an ill-informed decision, and then had a gray, unfulfilling life.

In another sense, this story is allegorical. Once upon a time, a hopeful man seeking to serve others better had a simple insight. In that moment of insight, there were infinite pathways to action opened. The man first chose the path of letting others build a case and determine the right action for him. Once he made that choice, he lost sight of his original capacity for insight and the infinity of pathways to action he had glimpsed. He became invested, without question, in the others' plan, both literally and figuratively. The plan did not work out. The literal investment was almost lost; the figurative investment produced pain and self-recrimination. The man lost his heart and did not look for it again because he could not see beyond the finite disappointment to search the infinite hope in which the heart always dwells.

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Finite disappointment is an occasional inevitability of our freedom to choose, to "form" hope into a plan by picking a possibility from the field of infinity. Expectations attached to the plan are an inevitability of our ability to reason, to defend what we've picked. As

life plays out, we cannot avoid disappointment, nor can we be completely free of expectations that bind us to those disappointments and shackle us to the fear of being disappointed again, or looking bad, or being foolish.

The inestimable varieties in the infinite field of possibility blossom eternally. They are always there to be picked. We can search that field and choose anew again and again and again. There is no disappointment in infinity, only undying hope that some of those choices will blossom in the world and knowledge that we never run out of choices and never lose the ability to choose.

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