

One Man's Ceiling is Another Man's Floor

Is there an upper limit on the possibilities for any person's sense of well-being?

This question was raised in a discussion I joined recently about the potential for an elevation in well-being in diverse populations. The person who asked the question thought it was likely that there were impediments for some people that did not exist for others, but that most people can "only go so far" before they reach the ceiling on their own potential. In particular, the questioner felt that people who had had a hard life, or who were economically or educationally deprived, just could never be as happy or hopeful as people who had had a "good" life and had never been exposed to deprivation or difficulty.

The discussion rode a see-saw between some who thought the human potential for well-being, hope and achieving one's dreams was universal and unlimited, regardless of any person's background or life circumstances and those who thought that life sets limits on certain people and it is unrealistic, if not wrong, to encourage them to believe that it doesn't. Some thought that all people are able to see for themselves how to succeed and achieve their dreams. Others thought that some people can dream, and others must settle for "as good as it gets", given their pasts and their life circumstances.

The conversation eventually drifted to another topic, with all of the participants equally convinced that their point of view made the most sense. One member of the group summed it up this way: "It seems to me that we all have certain ideas about how life is. So if your idea is that people are limited by certain things, then that's how life looks to you and that's how you and others appear to be. But if your idea is that there are no limits, then you'll see life differently and nothing will seem to be in your way."

The underlying unresolved issue was clear-cut: Do people imagine certain limits and live as though they were true for them, not knowing that the only thing holding the limits in place is the power of their imagination? Or do people actually have limits imposed irrevocably on them by their particular lives?

This raises, for me, another point. Can these questions be resolved at all without considering a different set of questions? Isn't the human imagination the very force behind both the belief and the disbelief that external life circumstances can control us? Isn't the human imagination the only tool we have to shape all our ideas about life, including whether or not we're subject to our already formed beliefs? What, other than our own thinking, brings the idea of limits to our minds and to our lives?

This question brought back an experience I had while visiting India in 1998. Two friends and I had gone to a temple in Calcutta on a brutally hot afternoon, which also turned out to be a special holiday. The temple was teeming with worshippers carrying picnic boxes and baskets of flowers with which to make offerings. A long line wound through the temple courtyard, where there was no shade at all, with people awaiting their turn to scatter petals at the feet of the holy statues and say a prayer. Two of us sat on the steps, fatigued by the thick, dusty air and the blazing sun and the arduous walk to the temple, while the third member of our party got in line to join the worshippers. I was feeling increasingly out of place and obvious. All the Indian women were fully covered in flowing, colorful saris for this special day. I was wearing dirt-stained khaki trousers and a tee shirt damp with perspiration. I was flushed and dehydrated and feeling queasy. In my mind, I kept thinking I was offending people just by my presence, that I didn't belong there, that they must really resent two florid Americans sitting on their temple steps watching. I wanted to be anywhere else. I started thinking Americans should not intrude into holy places in other countries – that we were clearly marking ourselves as clumsy, ill-mannered and insensitive.

A group of Indian people approached us. I was sure they were going to insist that we leave, and I started feeling panicky because I couldn't see the third member of our party anywhere. We could not get separated – we would never find each other again in this mass of people. I could not flee, so I sat there miserably, awaiting a confrontation.

One of the women approached me and said, “You are too warm. Perhaps this will help.” She sprinkled some fragrant water over my head and face from a small vial. It felt wonderful. Then she pulled a little scarf from her basket and asked if I would like it to protect my head. Meanwhile, one of the men had begun talking to my companion. He had a son attending college in the U.S. He wanted us to write down our names and where we were from, so he could let his son know he had met some Americans who knew where his son's college was. Two of the children sidled up to us and touched our pants legs, curious about the fabric. “We are honored at your interest in our holy day,” one of the men said. He offered to tell us more about it and what it meant to them.

Time passed quickly as we enjoyed their engaging and touching stories. Soon the third member of our party returned. We said our good-byes and left the temple, refreshed and energized by this encounter.

Considering this day afterwards, I realized that if these people had not approached us and virtually derailed my speeding train of thought, I would have “made up” from my own imagination an Ugly American scenario that could subsequently have impacted all future travel experiences. Given the thoughts I was generating and making into a theory that seemed true to me because I could “see” evidence for it, I might have determined that I should avoid visiting others' holy places. I might have become increasingly self-conscious about venturing far from the usual tourist routes. A year or more later, when I

was in Casablanca, Morocco, I might have refused to go to the magnificent Mosque there and missed one of the most enlightening and inspiring experiences of my lifetime. Even though I know that my imagination is the powerful instrument behind my assumptions about what is real, I could not at that moment see that I was making up from nothing a whole set of ideas about myself in relation to others. I would have sworn that I was simply observing an obvious external reality, and that I was right.

Whenever these things happen, it is another awakening to the power we give to our own opinions about life – and to how easily we forget the source of those opinions. Once we have built a definitive argument within our own minds for anything, we have difficulty giving it up, no matter what questions we're asked. I had a Chinese friend one time who was trying to get me to try a certain soup. I had a lot of squeamish thoughts about the ingredients. My friend said, "Sensation of flavor is in the tastebuds; judgment about flavor is in the mind. You can change your mind. Then you can enjoy the flavor."

The only limits that any of us impose on our full enjoyment of life and on our willingness to dream and see our dreams come to fruition are the flavors of our imagination. Imagination is a human capacity; it is central to our existence as human beings and it is an ability common to every person alive. All people make things up within their own minds. And once people have "made up their minds," the made-up structure takes on a reality for them that is apparently "true". If what they have made up contains ideas about themselves or their families that impose serious limits on their capacity to change or improve their lives, that reality is apparently depressing or humiliating. If what they have made up contains hope and promise, that reality is apparently encouraging or inspiring. If they have made up the idea that they are "stuck", then they remain "stuck" as long as they have that idea in mind. If they have made up the idea that nothing can stop them from fulfilling their dreams, then they can see the pathway to those dreams stretching before them and recognize how to navigate the path to find their way.

The example of Olympic athletes came up not long ago in a conversation about this. "Don't use that example," someone said. "Most people see those athletes as driven and nearly obsessed." But what is "drive"? What is "obsession"? In the realm of the imagination, "drive" is the pull of a dream one can see so clearly that it is like an oasis in the desert, drawing one towards it. The dream is the power of thought exercised to create a vision; drive is the purposeful thinking one does to get there. In the realm of imagination, "obsession" is a constantly repeated thought so vivid and important to the thinker that it crowds out other thinking and precludes distraction. If it is negative, it is seen as an illness. If it is positive, as in the single-minded push to Olympic Gold, it is seen as character.

When we don't know that we're making it up, either way, we are always living in the house of our own ideas, with no understanding of where the doors are. Even when we change our minds, it never looks like we changed – it looks like something moved us into

a different house somehow. But when we do know that we're making it up – that our limits are self-created products of our own power to think - we are free to come and go at will. Even when we are living within our “limits”, we know what we're doing. Life makes sense to us. Change is a constant possibility. Hope is a new idea that could be the next thought, the turn of a mental doorknob.

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