

# Our Grievances Fuel Political Demagogues

“I was grocery shopping and someone banged my foot with their shopping cart,” said a participant in a workshop I was conducting with a large organization. “They made me mad!”

Defensive and indignant, the participant went on to tell how he didn’t receive a proper apology. “Everyone in this room knows what I’m talking about,” he said, looking for support.

The workshop’s objective was to improve the performance of administrative assistants. The topic was mindset. I had been leading the group to show how our experience of life is generated moment by moment from the inside out. Although it seems that circumstances, events, and other people create our experience of life, it is really our interpretation of these things that creates our experience. Our experience of life always comes from the inside.

Dialogue in the group continued with stories and questions. As I gained a better understanding of the man’s mindset, I responded, “I don’t get upset in that situation, because I don’t take the bang personally.”

On the man’s face, I could see that his thinking about his position had come to a full stop. He saw that he had taken the incident personally; he had never considered another interpretation.

After lunch, he asked for the floor. He explained that he’d had an epiphany. He saw that he was going through life taking things personally. He was making his experience of life hard on himself and probably on others, at work and at home. He was certain, he told the group, that he was a changed man.

Nervous laughter rippled through the room. Some in the group

were puzzled by his realization. Many others were not ready to consider that there was a better way through life than constant struggle and conflict. Heads nodded as one person shared an example of how she felt “happy” when she “triumphed” over someone who had done her “wrong.”

Seeing themselves as victims, they were miserable. Relationships with their colleagues were uneasy; grievances, once formed, lasted for years or decades. They pointed to external causes of their troubles – their managers, their workplace environments, and other circumstances of life.

They were holding onto grievances as though grievances were valued treasures. I wondered how much happier they would be if they used their time and energy to cultivate and share their talents.

## **Holding Grievances Has Consequences**

When we hold our grievances as treasures, demagogues will present us with a “devil” to blame. (See “Watch Out for Bigger, Badder Scapegoats in 2017” by Max Borders, FEE.org, March 22, 2016.)

In *The True Believer*, social philosopher Eric Hoffer’s seminal book on the nature of mass movements, Hoffer explains, “Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil. Usually the strength of a mass movement is proportionate to the vividness and tangibility of its devil.”

For Trump supporters, the devil is foreigners. Sandernistas focus on the 1 percent. Those who see themselves as victims are happy to follow the populist candidate who speaks for them, pointing a finger at the devil causing their ills.

Hoffer writes,

*The tendency to look for all causes outside ourselves*

*persists even when it is clear that our state of being is the product of personal qualities.... It is understandable that those who fail should incline to blame the world for their failure.*

Hatreds expressed in a mass movement, Hoffer observes, stem from our sense of personal failure when we don't cultivate our talents. The hatreds of mass movements, he explains, "are an expression of a desperate effort to suppress an awareness of our inadequacy, worthlessness, guilt and other shortcomings of the self."

There is an alternative to living life with a sense of inadequacy. Ralph Waldo Emerson advised putting our heart into work. In his classic essay "Self-Reliance," he writes, "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace."

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When we don't put our heart into our work, we will seek alibis. In another of Hoffer's books, *The Passionate State of Mind, and Other Aphorisms*, he explains why we are drawn to seek alibis:

*There are many who find a good alibi far more attractive than an achievement. For an achievement does not settle anything permanently. We still have to prove our worth anew each day: we have to prove that we are as good today as we were yesterday. But when we have a valid alibi for not achieving anything we are fixed, so to speak, for life.*

There were many "alibis" expressed by the group in the workshop that day. How many people, unfulfilled because they are not using their talents, are drawn to dangerous mass

movements whose leaders provide alibis?

## **The Antidote to Grievances**

To almost every workshop participant that day, shirking and forming grievances were justified responses to the circumstances they faced, even though those responses were getting in the way of a happy life. They felt destined to put up with their lives and hang on until retirement.

In their victim mindset, they were not able to gain clarity about other choices they could make to put their energy to better use. Alternatives such as identifying their larger purpose in life, finding a new direction for their career, or making a difference in their current situation were crowded out by a preoccupation with grievances.

What they did not yet understand was that when we take responsibility for what we are feeling, we see more clearly the choices available to us. Out of a mind clear of grievances, new choices emerge.

Reading the Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers, one is struck by just how long mankind has been wrestling with the burdens of holding grievances and struggling to find pathways to a fulfilling life. Thousands of years before our time, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus spoke timeless wisdom. In his most famous book, the Enchiridion (the Manual), Greco-Roman philosopher Epictetus offers this:

*People are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.... Remember that foul words or blows in themselves are no outrage, but your judgment that they are so. So when any one makes you angry, know that it is your own thought that has angered you.*

In his Meditations, Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius states that an effective life depends on knowing that

our outside-in thinking is false. He instructs us, "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

Many of those workshop participants were spending time in their days choosing to be unfulfilled. Roman philosopher, playwright, and statesman Seneca the Younger reflected that "time is squandered in the pursuit of pleasure or in vain idleness." The very title of his book, *On the Shortness of Life*, reminds us that one day, at a time possibly unexpected, all of us will face our end.

We are foolish about our use of time. Seneca observed, "Men are frivolous with the most valuable thing in the world, blind to its value because it is intangible, because it cannot be seen, and for this reason it is considered a very cheap thing – even of almost no value at all."

It is easy to occupy our mind with excuses for our misuse of our time and talents. Guilt accumulates and gnaws at us when we do. Demagogues are ready to exploit our feelings of inadequacy and to provide us with alibis. Beware of politicians who, wanting to expand the scope of government, promise external solutions to relieve our troubles.

Epictetus advised, "Act your part with honor." In a world where expediency is increasingly the norm, what advice could be more important? Despite what others are doing, we can choose to stop holding grievances as treasures; we can choose to use our time and talents well. If we each act our part with honor, the demagogues will be out of business.

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