



Don't pick fights you don't need

Bởi:

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“Only fight those battles worth fighting. Not every call is worth answering nor should YOU be the one to respond. Learn to negotiate assignments... Respect your energy limits. Know those limits. By refilling, you'll have more stamina for the long haul.”

Eileen McDargh: *The Resilient Spirit: Heart Talk for Surviving in an Upside Down World*

Most of us pick fights we don't need, that we can't afford to wage, and that we cannot possibly win. These unnecessary battles divert attention and energy from the fights that really do matter, and eventually suck the joy and enthusiasm from our lives. We make these gratuitous little declarations of war on a daily, even hourly, basis. Worse yet, we're often not even aware that we're at war, much less the price we will pay for this constant inner conflict. Because they constitute lots of little skirmishes as opposed to one climactic clash of arms, these interminable battles wear us down in a constant war of attrition, the impact of which is so gradual and cumulative that we are barely aware of it happening.

What are these insidious little declarations of war? Complaints. Every time you complain about something – about anything – you are simultaneously telling yourself, and anyone else who will listen, that you are a victim, and declaring emotional war on that which you perceive to be victimizing you. For example:

“This soup is awful.” (I'm declaring emotional war on the restaurant.)

“They don't pay me enough to put up with all of this frustration.” (I'm declaring emotional war on my employer.)

“My back is killing me.” (I'm declaring emotional war on my body.)

“This lousy weather is ruining my vacation.” (I'm declaring emotional war on Mother Nature.)

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It's still hotly debated whether or not war is the natural state of humankind, but there is no doubt that complaining is the natural state of many humans. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out in his book *The Evolving Self*, for a variety of evolutionary reasons the human mind gravitates towards negative, frightening, and depressing thoughts. In the absence of anything legitimate on which to focus that negativity, such as a rapidly approaching saber-toothed tiger, we tend to complain about whatever is at hand, unaware of the terrible price we pay for it.

Most of these little declarations of war are unnecessary and unwarranted. As Eric Hoffer wrote in *The True Believer*, the people who complain most vociferously are those who already have a great deal and want even more, not those who have nothing and want something. Not only is it unwarranted, it can be downright dangerous since, as Maya Angelou points out, whining alerts bullies that there is a victim in the vicinity. Complaining is the most visible outward symptom of the downward Victim Spiral, which begins with:

Learned Helplessness: "If I could actually do something about this, do you think I'd be complaining about it?"

Once complaining has sufficiently conditioned us to feel helpless, we spiral down into:

Blame Game: "This isn't my fault and I can't do anything about it, so someone else must be to blame."

In the process of pointing fingers at the culprit (including the ubiquitous anonymous "they") we hit bottom at:

Victim Syndrome: "Since I can't do anything about this, and somebody else is to blame for it, that makes me a victim."

Complaining and its conversational companion commiserating (co-miserate: to be miserable together) are the emotional equivalent of trench warfare: they make life a dreary slog through the mud of no-man's land while being shot at by unseen adversaries. We've all had the experience of sailing along in good spirits and then having some pickle-sucker come along bitching and moaning about whatever ache happens to be in their belly at the moment, sucking the wind right out of our sails – the emotional equivalent of a trench raid.

In her book *Everyday Zen*, Charlotte Joko Beck writes, "We love our drama. We like to complain and agonize and moan." Yes, indeed, we cling to our messy, miserable little dramas the way Brer Rabbit stuck to the tar baby. It's easier to complain about a problem than it is to fix the problem; it's comforting to complain and have someone else share the misery (commiserate) with us.

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But complaining is *always* living in the past. Whether it was five seconds ago or five years ago, the thing you are complaining about is over with. At this precise second, nothing or nobody is causing you harm; nothing or nobody is hurting you in the future except in your imagination. Dragging around this anchor of the past will drain you of your energy and enthusiasm.

Think of dissatisfaction as a resource – you are only capable of so much of it. You have the choice of spreading it around with constant complaining, or you can concentrate it on a very small number of things that really matter. For example, if the one and only thing upon which you are focusing your dissatisfaction is an unhappy living situation (like Jeff Foxworthy's redneck, your house has wheels and your car doesn't), you won't have extra emotional energy to spare complaining about your job (you're too busy doing a great job so you'll get a raise to help pay for that new dream house) or about the weather (every time it rains, the leaky roof on your mobile home motivates you to turn off the TV and get to work on that home-based business with which you're making the money for the down payment).

If you get into the victim spiral, you end up circling the drain