

The Void
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YOUR LITTLE CHILD IS RUNNING OUTSIDE. She trips, falls, hits her face against a stone step, hurts herself badly. After a few seconds of suffocated silence, she starts screaming. She may have broken her jaw.

What do you do?

Some years ago I witnessed this very scenario. I was at Les Halles, a busy shopping mall in the heart of Paris. Inside the complex there's a small courtyard, with stone steps leading to a terrace. The girl was about two years old. She was running at full tilt with unbound excitement, and when she rushed onto the steps



she fell face down, hitting her jaw on the stone. The sound her jaw made against the stone was horrifying and indescribable.

Her father was standing right next to her. Immediately after she fell, he exclaimed, loudly enough for all to hear: "I *told* you not to run like that!"

We can't know for sure what was going on through his mind. Is he that much of an insensitive father, a control freak, a monstrous disciplinarian? Perhaps; there certainly exist guys like that. Was he concerned with other people's assessment of his ability to "educate" his child? It's possible, but we can't know for sure. Was he just freaking out, and voicing the dread that his beloved daughter was badly hurt? That's possible, too.

We can't know any of that. But we can be almost sure that his reaction did nothing to solve the problem at hand, and most likely aggravated it.

Before we deal too harshly with this hapless parent, let's accept that when faced with many of life's problems, big and small, we all have the potential to act pretty much the way he did. We want the problem to disappear. We want the problem never to have existed. We want to blame other people for the problem. Or we find fault with ourselves, even when we are blameless. We feel angry, frustrated, and afraid. And we don't want those emotions to stay inside us. We vent. We rant and rave. Or we act and *do something*.

More often than not, this makes the problem worse. Conflicts escalate. Our ability to think through the problem and its possible solutions gets clouded. The problem itself escapes us; we lose sight of what the problem actually is.

And *that* becomes the problem.

The father of my example put himself in a state. As long as he stayed there, he'd be unable to do anything constructive to solve that other, more pressing, problem: his endangered child, overwhelmed and helpless.



The father's first duty toward her daughter (and in truth also toward himself) is to do nothing that aggravates the problem. And to make sure he doesn't aggravate the problem, *he must do nothing, period*—perhaps for a microsecond, perhaps longer. The void (that is, doing nothing) provides room for all good things in the world to come in; but once the void is filled with something, all

other possibilities are excluded, at least until room is made for them by the creation of another void. And the void is preferable to anything negative or destructive that occupies it.

The father does absolutely nothing for a moment that may be extremely short. During the moment of doing nothing, he gets a grip on himself; check his fear, his desire to act out on the fear, his impulse to have his child be the recipient of his fear. And then he picks up his child and calls for the ambulance.

Let's open a parenthesis and look at a less urgent situation.

We take roller coaster riders and watch horror movies and smoke dope just so we can lose our balance, our sense of habitual safety. We like it, as long as we know our balance will be restored. Children do the same thing: they turn and turn and turn until they're so dizzy they fall on the ground, laughing all the while. A child might trip and fall accidentally, in the playground or at the beach. She might decide the fall is no big deal. She'll get up and resume her running, as happy as only a child knows how to be. Or she might ponder the situation for a brief moment. While pondering it, she hears her mother's voice: "Ohmigod! Are you okay? Are you okay?" The mother certainly behaves as if she herself thinks the child is in danger. The child hears it, loud and clear: "Mommy is upset. That can only mean one thing: a bad thing has just happened. I . . . I did a bad thing. I'm hurt. I'll be punished. Bwaaaah!"

Your fear? Yes, your child reacts to it.

Anger? You bet.

Scorn and mockery? Yep.

Well-meaning concern? Of course. The child reacts to *every* emotion. And a parent's well-meaning concern is a potential burden for the child to carry. I think the parent serves the child best by a tender attitude that says, "I'll help you if you want my help. I'll leave you alone if you want to be left alone. Cry if you want to, suppress your crying if you want to. I'll wait for you until you're ready." This is different from saying, "Cry, baby, cry." Or "Don't cry, baby, you're all right."



Now we go back to our example of a child badly hurt.

Who is the ideal ambulance driver? Someone cool and collected, in full possession of his driving skills, his sense of direction, his capacity to ask for a police escort or warn an ER of his impending arrival. The ambulance driver is neutral, alert, and intelligent.

Let's say you get your daughter to the hospital. Let's say she has fractured her jaw and needs facial surgery. Throughout the entire ordeal—accident, ER, surgery, intensive care, recovery at home—the child reacts to your thoughts and emotions. Your duty, then, is to put yourself in the ambulance-driver state: neutral, alert, and intelligent. Your child hurts? You're neutral, alert, and intelligent. Your child is in intensive care? You're neutral, alert, and intelligent. Your child arrives home with her mouth wired shut? You're neutral, alert, and intelligent, at her service in whatever capacity she requires you to be.

The human potential for self-regeneration is remarkable. I used to see a doctor who would hear my complaints, then say, "Call me again in three months if it persists." Often the complaints dissipated, and I wouldn't need to call the doctor back. Time helps; attitudes and their energies help, too. If you keep focusing on the problem, you'll think "accident, pain, fear, danger, hurt, frustration, anger, guilt." This very thought spins negative and unhealthy energies. To solve the problem, then, you have to stop thinking of it, and turn your attention instead to the solution: the intermediate steps, the indirect procedures, the side trips and tangents that eventually lead to the problem's dissolution.

You're going to entertain the child, keep her company, give her small gifts. But if she wants to be left alone, you'll do that, too. She has her own powers of self-regeneration, and by

doing too much for her you may be sabotaging her recovery. It's no good to keep telling her, "You're strong, you'll recover; you're strong, you'll recover." If she's strong, she doesn't need to be told it; if she needs to be told it, she isn't strong; if you keep telling her she's strong, she'll suss out that you're saying, "You're not strong enough to recover without my telling you again and again that you're strong." And she'll behave accordingly.

Give her time, space, the possibility of her taking initiatives even if some of her initiatives carry risks and dangers—as do all initiatives, without exception. Haven't you been telling the child how she strong she is? Let her be.

The solution for every problem in your life starts with your *doing nothing*—every last problem, including stage fright, writer's block, a twisted ankle, a troubled sibling, an exam, a lawsuit, anything. Within yourself, create a void: a neutral, alert, and intelligent state in which you'll be able to stop focusing on the problem and start focusing on the solution. And don't wait until you have a problem. Embody the void, now and always. Thanks to you, many potential problems will be preventively "voided."

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