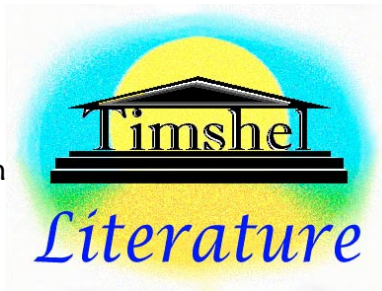


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**Just Thinking, 02/17/03:
I Sometimes Need Reminding**
by Justin Katz

How can you love others when you don't love yourself? How can you make others happy when you, yourself, are not? How can you give of yourself when you don't know who you are? Who you *truly* are, breaking through familial binds and cultural boundaries. Without having searched life through in order to find what among its various offerings you truly desire, how can you know, in the end, that you lived it well?

I've come to regard these questions as among the most dangerous that we encounter in modern life. Once, when oppression and self-abnegation were wound so tightly that they bound those not freed by wealth and status and squeezed all joy from life, such thinking may have served to remind people of finer goals for which to seek. Taken to extremity in a culture of excessive ease, however, framing our thoughts in this way can undermine the very benefits for which we long.

Loving others and making them happy is a source of happiness for and peace with ourselves. Moreover, the extent and form of our personal generosity are indicators of "who we are." Without boundaries, we are formless things; like water, we seep into life whichever way offers the least resistance. To know the character of our fluid natures, we require external circumstances by which to judge the choices that we make.

It's a precarious balance, that between thinking of one's self and thinking of others, and keeping it is a necessity that many understandably desire to evade. The obvious, and the most

common, direction in which to run from the responsibility of decision-making is into self – the easy, amorphous path taken in avoidance of discomfort. Another route is outward, whereby the comfort of another is substituted for one’s own.

I had hoped, upon becoming a parent, to experience this complete giving-over of self. In the year since I was blessed with my new focus, my daughter, I’ve discovered three complications. The first is that I did not cease to exist as an autonomous person – and a good thing, too, because that would have left me with no basis from which to act as a parent. The second is that there is still time in the day to act apart from my daughter, as well as the need for her, in the long run, to learn to act apart from me. The third is that the ideal way in which to go about serving her needs is no more discernible than the same consideration for myself.

The importance of finding a way through this tightrope maze of responsibilities and desires is especially high when it comes to finding an occupation. For me, the fear of failure has become particularly acute now that the fruits of my work are not for me alone, but for my wife and for my child. On top of this equilibrium-threatening fear is piled the shifting worry that I may prove guilty of leaping for wisps of dreams of a career. In this mess of obligations and hopes and goals and fears lie many paths, and choosing that which seems correct, given the circumstances, will help me to find, even to define, myself.

I know this of myself: I’m driven to think and to express what I’ve thought. Inherent in that process is the potential vanity of wanting an audience, and when that audience seems impossible, a loneliness creeps into my mood throughout the day. Moreover, the hours spent molding ideas into coherent sentences appear wasted – stolen from the pursuit of income. The discouragement opening like a chasm in the path of my motivation when even friends show no interest in the craft on which I strive to build a career sucks in not only my confidence, but also my time. Another year spent failing is another year’s difference in age between my daughter and her

future sibling. Another year spent chasing shadows of hope on parchment is another year lived in a tiny house that scares me, sometimes, with its age and that my family can find no motivation to improve upon because it is not truly ours. Better perhaps, if this is all the case, to exchange my time more directly for cash.

But then again, the time is not truly wasted. Time is necessarily spent on building a platform from which to reach for opportunity, on networking, on improving the craft. As a doctor must spend hard years fulfilling requirements before the fulfillment and funds are realized, so, too, a writer must earn scars to thicken skin and thin the muddle of the language used. From this perspective, time spent heaving fish for seven dollars an hour (for example) yields a meager profit for the cost of rewarding work. Even more, if my words could be built into a means of financial support, I would have more time to devote to my family. And that time would not be tainted by the unfair, erroneous feeling that I ought to be doing other things — chasing accomplishment.

There is much truth in sayings that urge deriving happiness from that which we already have. Yet, it is impossible to deny that barriers exist and can and should be overcome. So, where's the balance? Surely it shifts with time. Do I hang a sign around a certain age reading, "Abandon hope all ye who pass here without promise of success"? I am not so lost in my artistry that I could not let it slip into that aforementioned chasm if it proved something for which I had inadequate talent to carry.

It would be wrong to burden my life and the lives of those whom I love with obdurate insistence that I am someone or something that I demonstrably am not. But how could I convince my daughter that there is a self worth preserving if I make inadequate attempt to overflow barriers that restrain me unnaturally? How do I find happiness when I fail to so?

Me, I know — although I sometimes need reminding.