

The Happy Art of Sadness

A writer's guide to healthy maladjustment

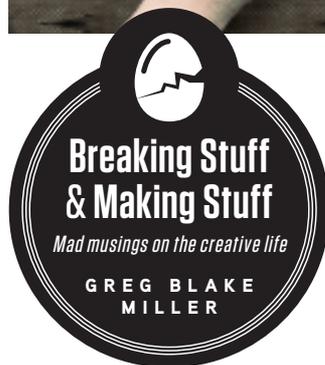
▶ **IF YOU ARE A WRITER**, or a person who thinks in sentences—which is to say, if you are a person—you know that a scar long healed is nonetheless a scar, and you find yourself occasionally summoning old pain. Why is this? Is life not interesting enough for you? Happiness got you down? Ah, what's the use of asking why: The creative writer calls upon pain, and pain is always pleased to answer.

So the new question arises: If we are bound to interrogate ourselves in this apparently unenjoyable and, let's face it, unattractive way, how are we to produce something enjoyable and attractive? Does the metabolizing of grief have nontoxic byproducts?

Let's pause to reflect on how sadness—once considered a veritable badge of honor among creative types—fell into such disfavor in the past decade. Maybe it was the millennial boomlet in woe-is-me victim memoirs; maybe it was the Oprah confessional; maybe it was that time Oprah unmasked a victim-memoirist as a big fake. Maybe it was the publication of Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which defined creativity away from suffering artists and toward clever lawyers and playful Web titans who seemed to be demonstrably not suffering. Maybe it was the rise of Happiness Studies, an effort to scientifically examine a thing most of us can't even define. The latest word is that social interaction makes us happy, that happiness makes us creative, and that our creativity is made solid in this world only through more social interaction. It's quite easy to look upon the Happy Creative wave and conclude that solitude is the enemy and sadness is the devil.

But people are unruly creatures, and for each of us happiness is a byproduct of different combinations of different things in different proportions at different times. Fortunately, we know a few constants: physical activity, meaningful work, love ... To these I would add that happiness is, in part, a byproduct of the artful use of our sadness.

So, how does one artfully use one's sadness? Tough question, and, appropriately enough, it took me some suffering to arrive at anything resembling answers. And those answers may look nothing at all like yours. But in



this age of sharing, allow me to, as they say, "put this out there":

Master the three aspects of the past. Acknowledge the past-ness of the past (it happened), the presentness of the past (what happened *then* helped create *now*) and the past's empowering future-ness (like a detective with a collared perp, you get to unmask the past, interrogate it and put it to work for you as you solve the next mystery).

Pick your spots and engage meaningfully. A gift for solitude and a grasp of sadness are valuable social skills. The person incapable of being alone is hard-pressed to understand the value of togetherness; the man who has never struggled with sadness is at

a distinct disadvantage in understanding his fellow man's blues.

When you sing of a sad moment, focus on the moment, not just the sadness. Recognize the specificity of your story, the objects and the injuries, the loved ones and the damage done, what the weather was like on the best and worst days of your life. Remember the smell of the air, of the food, of her perfume. Remember the autumn yellow of the grass on the Saturday morning when Jimmy DiGiorgio's slide tackle broke your leg. Remember the whole vast kaleidoscope, and you'll see the shards of suffering merge into the image of life. Fragments fuse on impact, forming new ideas, new pictures in your head, newly discovered elements on the emotional periodic table. Your dreams grow vivid; your mornings begin earlier. You find your way to the keyboard.

Tell me now: Do you feel happy? Well, do ya?

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Ask a Native

JAMES P. REZA

SHOULD I GIVE THAT CRYING GIRL A RIDE TO THE BUS STATION?

No. Even though I once did. I was driving to lunch with my gal and my mom when we spotted a twenty-something woman near the 7-Eleven at Oakey and Las Vegas boulevards. Dressed in a bohemian blouse, denim cutoffs and sandals, with a pricey SLR camera around her neck and carrying a bag of souvenirs and snacks while studying a printed Internet map, she looked everything like a wayward music festival attendee. I lowered the driver's window and yelled, "Are you lost?" Between sobs (and with a thick European accent) she said, "I'm looking for the Greyhound station." Her bus was leaving in 15 minutes!

After polling my passengers, we all agreed (well, not Mom) to offer her a lift to the station a few minutes away. It was a quick, easy decision; after all, she appeared harmless enough. And, likely, so did we. She hesitated for only a moment before hopping in the backseat (my mother swiftly relocating her purse) and wiping away tears.

Her story seemed reasonable: She was visiting friends in California and decided on a bus trip to Vegas (her first) to see a Cirque show. Not only was she lost, but she had misjudged the walking distance to the bus station—easy to do along Las Vegas Boulevard. Moments later, she was thanking us as she hurried into the station. We continued our quest for lunch. No harm, no foul.

Later, I discovered Mom was convinced the woman was a hooker running from a pimp. And whenever I run down the bullet points, I'm forced to admit it sounds a little ... Vegasy: Attractive young woman, standing alone on a Strip street corner that actress Mindy Kaling derided as "sketchy" ... sporting short-shorts ... carrying no luggage ... crying, and desperately trying to get to the bus station ... the day after a big boxing weekend ... with an Eastern European accent. Duh!

So, in Vegas, does one-plus-one equal hooker? Often, I have learned, it does. Still, a query of acquaintances slightly favors the woman's story, though one hedged his bet: "Either way, you did her a favor." Perhaps. But, those probably aren't the kind of favors one should get in the habit of doing here. Next time, I'll err on the side of my seasoned Vegas profiling skills and call a cab—no matter how harmless things may appear.



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