

Indispensable People (or: How I stopped being indispensable and got a life)

David Breeden at Eliot Chapel on April 27, 2008

Reading: Andre Comte-Sponville, page 129

ONE

I used to be indispensable. My indispensability snuck up on me, like the proverbial lobster pot rising in temperature one degree at a time. The fact that I was in hot water, that I had become indispensable, hit me in the middle of a conference call one afternoon. I'd had a surgical procedure that morning and couldn't get out of bed. So I arranged to make the conference call, so I could keep up with my responsibilities. Sometime during the call, it hit me: This is absurd. Then I remembered an old saying by an indispensable dead guy, Charles de Gaulle. He once said, "The graveyards are full of indispensable people."

During that bed-ridden conference call I realized that I was indispensable. And that indispensability is an absurd fiction. And that indispensability was killing me.

Now, perhaps you agree with me that a little self-awareness is a dangerous thing. Because, as I lay in bed, drugged and bleeding and conducting my indispensable business, I couldn't figure out how to stop being indispensable.

Perhaps you have read the statistics: Every year here in the United States the work year increases by one day. The Average American has only sixteen hours of leisure a week after a job is done and household chores are out of the way. Working hours are longer than they have been since the 1920s ([The Overworked American](#)). Cornell professor James Maas calls the US a "nation of walking zombies" and estimates that the average American has a two hour per day sleep deficit. Dr. Maas estimates that being sleepy causes 1500 fatal accidents per year and costs the economy 150 billion dollars (Maas, *Power Sleep*).

We are so indispensable we can't even sleep!

And we are losing more than sleep. . .

I must admit that I dealt with my despair at being indispensable in some very unhealthy ways, and my revelation of indispensability's absurdity—my glimmer of self-awareness—didn't stop me from continuing my ways for a couple more years. I just couldn't see how to stop being indispensable.

Were my story unique, I would not be telling it to you; it is not, however, novel. I know that many of you here today are dying of indispensability. You might be in Stage One, you might be in Stage Four, but many of you have the indispensability disease.

You too may be dying of indispensability.

Now, if my story were one of a sudden, dramatic conversion, or one of a sudden, calamitous disaster, neither scenario would be surprising; but my situation was more dangerous than that. In addition to the

unhealthy ways I dealt with my situation, I also exercised; meditated; saw therapists; went to the doctor; took anti-depressants; bought heaps of self-help books. Prayed. Journalled. Reached out to friends. I was, in other words, PROACTIVE in my collapse. I did what we are told we are supposed to do.

Still, eventually, I ended up in the floor, in a fetal position, hyperventilating, writhing, weeping, and chewing on my wrists. Eventually I ended up in a room with the lock on the other side of the door. With cameras trained on me so I wouldn't harm myself. Eventually I ended up institutionalized, my civil rights taken away because I was. . . insane.

That's how indispensable I was.

I ended up on a road of twelve-step programs; therapy and yet more anti-depressants.

If my story were unique, I would not be telling you. We all know that silence kills. I am naming a disease in the hopes that . . . maybe. . . some of you can save yourselves or someone you love. . .

## TWO

Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello tells the story of an old farmer who lived on the border between Finland and Russia. The old farmer had always thought he lived in Russia until one day some Russian and Finnish officials came by to inform him that his house was precisely on the border between Finland and Russia: the old farmer could choose which nation he wished to be a citizen of.

The old farmer thought and thought; he thought so long that the officials were beginning to get peeved. Eventually the old farmer said, "Though I love Mother Russia with all my heart, and have lived in Russia all my life, I choose for my house to be in Finland." At this the old man broke down crying.

The Russian officials were amazed. "The choice is yours," the Russian officials said, "but why—when it obviously makes you so sad—have you chosen for your house to be in Finland?"

"I love Mother Russia," the old man replied, "but I don't think I can survive another Russian winter. . ."

This anecdote points out the absurdity of definitions, but it also points out the fact that we live in definitions.

The Greek stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 CE) once said, "People are not disturbed by things, but the view they take of things." A true statement, I think, though, when he read this statement by Epictetus, behavioral psychologist Herb Kimmel responded, "Yes, but what about things like bullets?"

Our problem, the human dilemma is, that both statements are true.

Continuously in philosophy, psychology, and religion we hear that it is our view of things that affects reality. Stoic philosophy is built on the idea, as is the Buddhist concept of non-attachment and the Taoist idea of allowing water to flow where it will. Our attitudes cause our suffering. But also. . . they don't. It's a tough call, especially when YOU are the one in one of life's pickles.

I spent time as a chaplain in a hospital where the top floor was called "palliative care." That is, patients went to that floor when another medical procedure held very little hope. Patients on the palliative care floor were what is termed in the business "actively dying."

Actively dying patients seldom have ILLUSIONS about what is happening, but they have widely varying ATTITUDES about what is happening. And, frankly, those attitudes don't vary much according to religious beliefs.

The variation is in what people CHOOSE as the definition of their dying.

I have held the hands of those weeping and hyperventilating as they face the inevitability of their mortality; I have held the hands of those smiling and beatific as they face their end.

Same reality. But some people fear a Russian winter. And some chose to live in Finland for the winter.

Epictetus put his finger on a fact: "People are not disturbed by things, but the view they take of things." Stoic philosophy goes to town on that idea; Buddhism goes to town on that idea. What is called the New Thought Movement that gave us Christian Science and the Unity churches goes to town on that idea as well. And the lucrative re-packaging of that same idea will go on and on, I suspect.

But can such thinking save us from becoming indispensable?

"What about things like bullets?"

As Hamlet says, "Ah, there's the rub."

Yes—what about things like bullets? Because they are flying—in foreign nations; in airports; in our poverty zones; in our schools and fast-food emporia. . . in our halls of government.

I certainly WISH that a good attitude and positive definition would stop bullets from flying. But bullets fly, no matter whether we chose to live in Finland or Russia or the Sunny Side of Life.

### THREE

Now I admit to being unfair to Stoic philosophy and Buddhism and Taoism, which have considerably more depth than the latest New Age self-help phenomenon. Taoists and Buddhists know about bullets and bombers; Stoic philosophers knew that definitions and attitudes do not stop arrows; or disease; or old age. Epictetus was a Roman slave, after all. Stoicism and Taoism and Buddhism, as a matter of fact, work quite well on the palliative care floor—

wherever that may be.

Because we are all, after all,

actively dying.

No matter what our attitude about that.

And here I come back to my own story:

I am an American through and through and that means when I get into a spot I believe in DOING SOMETHING. So when my mid-life crises or whatever it was began to hurt too much, I DID SOMETHING. Because I believe in pulling myself up by my own bootstraps; and because I didn't WANT to HURT. And—my logic went—since I was indispensable, I had to get up and get on with it, by any means necessary.

Since my mid-life mental meltdown brought me to the ministry and not to other alternatives—such as . . . for example sky diving or motocross racing—you have perhaps already divined that the central question for me has been what role religion CAN play in personal salvation. And I use the term “religion” advisedly because, like many North Americans, I turned to what we call “spirituality” first. And I use the term “salvation” advisedly because I know the connotations the word has among Christian personal pietists, the sorts of people that make Unitarian Universalists very tired.

As I said earlier, during my breakdown I did everything “right.”

I reached out to friends and professionals.

I bought armloads of self-help books and armloads of books on Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, re-interpretations of Christianity,

and just about anything else I could think of.

I took to heart the sentiment behind the philosophy that “People are not disturbed by things, but the view they take of things.”

Still, for me, nothing stopped the bullets.

For me it came down to the moment that the poet Rilke describes looking at the power of a great piece of sculpture.

Rilke says “here there is no place that does not see you.

You must change your life.”

#### FOUR

There is a Taoist story that makes my next point.

Once upon a time in ancient China, the Emperor was in his study, looking over volumes of diplomatic documents. He found it hard to concentrate, so he summoned his most trusted Minister.

When the Minister arrived, he saw that the Emperor was pacing back and forth, looking irritable.

The Emperor said to him: “I wish to focus on the affairs of the state, but my mind is unsettled and agitated. When I feel like this, I need something I can look at to help me regain tranquility. Have the best artist in the land create a painting that has the power to calm me down. I want the theme of this painting to be ‘True Tranquility.’”

“As you command, Your Majesty.”

A few days later, the Minister reported that there were three artists widely considered to be the best in China. They were equally talented, so he brought all of them into the palace. Once they understood what the Emperor wanted, they began to paint.

When the work was done, the Emperor went into the studio with the Minister to see for himself. The first painting they looked at depicted a placid lake surrounded by mountains. It was a beautiful scene; the

surface of the lake seemed perfectly still and conveyed a peaceful feeling. The Emperor smiled: "This is beautiful."

The second painting showed a snowscape. It evoked the silence after a snowfall, a deep silence that went beyond mere lack of noise, because the snow banks absorbed all sound. Both the Minister and the Emperor nodded their approval. "Very insightful," said the Emperor.

They looked at the third painting, which featured a waterfall. "I am sorry, Your Majesty," the Minister said. "It looks like this artist did not understand my instructions to paint a scene of serenity. Let me discard this painting, and we can choose from the first two."

He reached for the painting, but the Emperor stopped him: "No, wait." He stared at it for a moment longer, and then said: "This is the painting for me."

"What? But - Your Majesty! How can this waterfall compare to the other two in representing tranquility? I do not understand!"

"The waterfall is not the most important thing in this painting," said the Emperor. "Look again."

The Minister took another look at the painting, more carefully this time. He saw that there was a tree next to the waterfall. One of the branches of the tree held a nest. A bird was sleeping inside that nest.

"See how the bird is able to relax and rest even though the deafening torrent is so close to it," the Emperor pointed out. "It has such a profound quietness within

that external conditions have no power to irritate or disturb. Now that is the essence of True Tranquility!"

[www.taoism.net](http://www.taoism.net)

Well, yes indeed it is. The trick is getting there. . .

Could I have saved myself somewhere along the line, or did I have to end up in an institution before I learned the limits of my power to affect events?

Conclusion

Perception. Reality. Illusion. Error. Bullets. Happiness.

In the reading for today, Andre Comte-Sponville looks at the difference between illusion and error. Comte-Sponville points out that illusion may be mostly wishful thinking, but error is always wrong.

Being driven by a feeling of indispensability is an error, not an illusion.

The feeling of indispensability may spring from wishful thinking, that the world can't run without us, and that maybe, just maybe, we are so important that we simply HAVE to be immortal.

But all evidence points to the contrary. Indispensability is an error.

For some reason I was so THICK that I had to go get a degree in ministry before I learned a simple lesson: Sometimes in life we are UTTERLY helpless.

The graveyards are full of indispensable people. What we have is a short time on this earth to spend wisely and happily.

Was the old farmer warmer because he lived in Finland rather than Russia?

Perhaps he was because he thought he was.

Or perhaps he discovered that Finnish winters are bad too.

Or perhaps the weather really was colder or warmer that winter and he attributed accident to his decisions.

Whatever the outcome,

reality DID NOT change: the old farmer lived on the border between.

As do we all.