

The Gift of Pain

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Though this last young adult group centered mostly around pets, what I dwelt on later was our discussion about seeing pain as a gift. Members shared their experiences with chronic illness and dyslexia and the lessons they learned.

Eventually, someone asked if anyone struggled with the phrase “the gift of pain.” At the time, I said I did not. I gave the example of my experience with epilepsy and how it helped me let go of my need for control. For the four years I was in college, I wasn’t sure when seizures would come and they weren’t something I could plan for beyond being ahead on my school work. At the end of the day, though, epilepsy isn’t something that was ever a huge source of anything I’d call pain. I wasn’t really answering the question.

I think my real source of pain is my periodic experience of loneliness or not feeling like I belong. That is much harder to see as a gift. While intellectually I can believe that struggling with this can and has made me more compassionate, when I’m in the midst of it I definitely struggle with accepting it. My instinct is to fight it off, “fix it,” or keep myself busy so as to avoid it.

I think back to junior high travel soccer, which left more scars than I care to admit. In elementary school, I loved soccer because I loved to run – and at that age being able to get to the ball fast enough and not tire out by the end of the game was a decent skill. I loved my coach, who was encouraging and positive. But by middle school when I started travel soccer, I spent most of our games on the bench and my coach and several of my teammates would yell at me when I made a mistake. One day, my mom noticed some of these exchanges. She told me I had to stand up to my teammates by talking to them before practice the next day to say that I deserved to be spoken to with respect. I did (largely because she refused to drive away until the conversation was over).

I wasn’t angry at my teammates or coach at the time. I felt shame because I didn’t fully believe that I deserved respect until I’d reached a certain skill level – as though being treated with dignity were something I had to earn through athletic prowess. And now I still feel shame that I believed that... perhaps because I still find myself falling into similar traps as an adult.

Perhaps this all comes back to pets in the end. Though I'm not an animal psychologist, I find it hard to believe that pets struggle with a sense of self-worth. I think they experience fear if they believe their behavior will bring about punishment. But I think their self-worth, however a dogs experience self-worth, remains intact.

What I would like to take away from our reflection on what our pets can teach us and the gifts of pain is that my self-worth doesn't have to be diminished when I experience fear of judgment. I can experience that fear. I can experience the pain of wondering if I belong. And I can value myself anyway and, in return, build empathy and the strength to keep daring to make mistakes.