

It was raining and it was past my bedtime, but I hardly noticed. I was craving ice cream. I grabbed my raincoat and told my husband I was going to the store and I'd be back in a jiff. The light rain dusted my cheeks like a sweet sugar coating. The night was chilly but the walk was invigorating. It was a relief to be away from him for a few minutes. Excitement coursed through me at this little deviation from my everyday routine. I chuckled as it dawned on me that I could do this anytime. How silly of me not to appreciate it sooner! I was completely free to go where I wanted, when I wanted.

The grocery store, which ordinarily felt cold, seemed hot that night. I was sweating. I unzipped my coat. I looked with detached interest at the strangers around me. They scanned the shelves with furrowed brows, absorbed in their dilemmas. There was something animalistic about them. They were like mice. Cute, interesting, pleasant, but not at all like me. I was an entirely different kind of creature. No one could break me the way they could be broken. And if I broke one of them, I wouldn't feel anything except perhaps mild curiosity. The clerk and I exchanged some friendly banter as I bought my ice cream. It was so easy to smile and be nice. Why shouldn't it be? I had nothing to fear.

I had to climb a hill to get back home. With every heavy step, I felt I was being lifted and crushed at the same time. I was struck with a sudden clarity, beautiful and yet terrible to behold. Every step that brought me closer to home seemed also to bring me back to the confinement of my ordinary life. Ahead of me there was home and fear. But there, in that moment, was freedom. I could go anywhere that I might wish to go! Why should I go back to that house, to that husband, to the misery that until this moment I had taken for granted as a necessity of life? It was like I had shrugged off a heavy backpack I didn't know I was carrying.

At the top of the hill, I had to cross the street. It had stopped raining. Even during the daytime, the cars couldn't see the top of the hill until they were practically upon it. But there were no cars coming now, and I didn't care if there were. In fact, as I stood smiling, balancing on the edge of the curb, I wished that they would. I dared them to. All was silent. I closed my eyes. I was suddenly swept up in imagery.

I was on top of a sky scraper. The city stretched out below me like a gray blanket dotted with little toys. Tiny people going about their tiny lives, driving toy cars. I was no longer a part of their world, but towering above it. The cool breeze whipped around me, blowing where it would. I stepped off the building. I laughed as I fell. My stomach flipped as my body adjusted to the sense of weightlessness. I spread my arms wide, as if to catch the wind. I would never go back. I would die when I hit the ground, but I would die free, and so my death would be a celebration of freedom. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, and if I wanted to die, I could do that, too. Was there any greater expression of autonomy than to throw open one's arms and cry, "Go ahead and kill me!"? I didn't fear death, because I wasn't human anymore. Nothing could kill what I had become, any more than one can kill the wind.

I opened my eyes. I was on the other side of the street. I was trembling all over. I was aware that something very weird had happened. I tried not to think about it. I went home. I ate ice cream and smoked a joint. And I tried to forget that for thirty seconds of my life, and only ever for that thirty seconds, I was truly, utterly, ready to die.

The circumstances that led up to that moment are complicated. My marriage had always been on a rocky foundation. Perhaps it was inevitable that it would all come crashing down before I was thirty. In any case, I am lucky that it did, because the collapse of my brief marriage was a wake-up call that profoundly changed me. Granted, I hit the snooze button as many times as I could, but eventually, I began to confront my reality. Or rather, both of my realities.

Our task in this essay is to find the meaning of that moment when I walked into the street with my eyes closed. These are the kinds of moments that defy simplistic slogans like love yourself, be yourself, and do self-care. What does it mean to "love yourself" when a secret part of you is goading you to jump off a building? No one can tell us how to relate to ourselves in that context, and we should probably be skeptical of people who try to. To make sense of such a moment we must dig deep within

ourselves, identify the notions and fantasies associated with that moment, and identify how those notions continue to impact our everyday choices in subtler ways. For even though the moment may pass, the underlying forces that produced that moment will continue to shape our experience.

For a long time, I thought I had pretty much everything I could want out of life. On the surface, I had a great husband, a stimulating job, and a really cute dog. I thought I was happy. Somewhere deep inside of me, though, something was sending subtle warnings: “He’s using you,” “Don’t do it,” “We don’t like this.” I assured myself that the next disagreement, the next social outing, or the next bout of sex would be different. I was just being too sensitive, too emotional, too dramatic. I rationalized whatever I needed to rationalize to preserve the status quo. Meanwhile, I felt frustrated that I had no sense of instinct, no sense of what I wanted. I felt lost in a fog. Ignoring my instincts was so automatic that at the time, I couldn’t see that my instincts were, in fact, quite active. It’s like that experiment where a gorilla steps into the middle of a basketball game and the viewers miss it because they’re focused on something else. They see the gorilla, and yet they don’t see it. Only in hindsight, when re-watching the video with different priorities in mind, do they say, “Wow, the gorilla was right in front of me all along!”

The more I ignored my red flags, the more they kept coming, growing ever bigger and more frequent. It was like I was being haunted by a jack-in-the-box that sporadically popped up and said, “Surprise, you’re wrong about everything!” I felt torn between two realities. There was the surface-level reality in which I was a privileged and happy person. Then there was the other reality, in which everything was backwards. In that reality, I hated the people I was supposed to love, and I yearned for the things I was supposed to fear. I fantasized about my husband’s death and about my own. I used alcohol and work to get away from him and from myself. Every evening when I crossed the threshold into my apartment, I was gripped with a taut, visceral fear as I listened for sounds of his presence, as one might listen for the sound of a tiger prowling about in the jungle. It was a relief when he wasn’t home. In this way I went about my life, hopping between the realities of optimism and despair. I didn’t know which one to believe. I only knew which one I wanted to believe. Gradually, so gradually that I didn’t have to acknowledge it, every day became a battle to cling to the happy reality, and to denigrate the upside-down one.

The daydream of John’s life as the Earl of Coventry sheds light on my psyche during this time. For many years, I had had vague imagery of a time in John’s past when he was very wealthy but unhappily married. Theodora had long complained of his “somber dirges”. However, the core of the daydream that became “The Calamity Part 1” largely came about in a single night. I was visiting my mother, and we’d been watching cozy mysteries like *Murdock and Father Brown*, as well as a four-part documentary on English landscape gardening featuring a visit to Croome Court. One night after my mother went to bed, I was seized by a furious fit of daydreaming. I paced around my room, gesticulating and whispering as I imagined this fantasy in which John must solve the mystery of his own murder, or rather attempted murder, which ends in a disastrous, fiery revelation of both his powers and his rage.

As usual, John and I have a lot in common. First, there is the obvious fact that he, too, was unhappily married. He, too, finally had everything he’d thought he wanted. Like me, he would not accept that it was not bringing him the happiness he’d hoped it would. Both John and I grew increasingly distraught that our lovers and our material successes no longer satisfied us, and fought to dismiss our feelings and control our circumstances. I have not described all the ways I tried to micromanage my husband’s behavior, but you may take my word for it that they were extensive. Perhaps when I was watching that documentary about the massive landscaping project at Croome Court, a part of me decided that the earl who’d commissioned that project must have felt that his personal life was spiraling out of control, and a natural reaction would be to micromanage his environment.

There is another layer to John's distress that is not, at least not obviously, shared with mine. That is the fact that John feels torn between life and death. Immortality, to him, means being trapped in life. The comfortable life he is supposed to want is a cage. He fantasizes about death, which represents liberation from the endless slog of life. However, he can't get too attached to death, for, among other reasons, death has a way of poisoning life. Every time he dies, he finds it harder to come back. It would all be much simpler if he could just love life and fear death like everyone else does, but it's more complicated than that. Death is like a drug that is too good, or like a forbidden fruit that might ruin your life if you eat too much of it. He wants it, though he wishes he didn't.

John's paranoid desire to catch the would-be murderer works as a metaphor for my need to control my own instincts. I both love and hate my instincts, just as John both loves and hates death. He is desperate to stop the murderer, even though a part of him actually likes being killed. He is trapping *himself* in life, by stopping the murderer and preventing death and its liberating effects. The more he tries to stop death, the more he feels trapped in life, and so the more tantalizing death becomes. My own instincts, those red flags, were sweet and liberating, for they revealed the truth that I was miserable. However, they also ruined my everyday life, by reminding me of the misery of my present endless slog. The more I repressed my instincts, the more I felt trapped in a pointless existence, with no sense of direction or meaning. And so by repressing my own instincts, I made those instincts into a tantalizing forbidden fruit—the more forbidden they were, the sweeter was the liberation they offered.

In my daydream world, John always had a complicated relationship with death because it was so beautiful, and the real world was disappointing by comparison. For some reason Flaed (Kate), who is also immortal, was never really bothered by death like he was. For this fictional story, I decided to draw on my experiences of mania in describing his deaths, because it felt therapeutic, and because it felt loyal to the sense of disappointment that had always accompanied his deaths.

Thus in the process of writing down the daydream, I found a common thread between John's relationship with death, my relationship with my instincts, and my manic episodes. All share the theme of the suffocation of repression/life and the allure of instinct/death. With this in mind, we begin to approach the significance of my manic episode.

That episode probably would have come along in some way, shape, or form regardless of what was going on with my life circumstances. Similar such episodes still crop up once in a blue moon, though rarely so severe, and although they have once or twice involved a certain fascination with the idea of suicide, I have never felt tempted by it as I was that night. If my everyday life is going well, then the episode tends to go well. I recognize what's happening and behave responsibly. I go for a long walk, talk to myself profusely, laugh at some foolish mortals behind their backs, and perhaps end my day sequestered in my bedroom, crying, shaking, and sweating in a half-naked fetal position. No particular harm done. When I was stuck in that flaming nosedive of a marriage, the episodes were more likely to involve drinking binges, shopping sprees, and weird phone calls.

The central meaning I take away from the night I walked into the street with my eyes closed is this: the problem was not the mania *per se*, but the way I related to it. On that night, I was faced with a jarring conflict between two realities. The dynamic felt familiar to me, because it was somewhat reminiscent of those jack-in-the-box moments I was already dealing with on a daily basis. It was a familiar struggle between a gilded cage and a dangerous, giddy freedom. In the heat of that moment, I confused the mania with liberation and death, and I confused the inevitable, depressing come-down with my husband and daily life. The suicide fantasy was about my secret yearning to surrender to the instincts that threatened to undermine my marriage. In my unconscious, death came to symbolize truth and freedom, a confusion that came to the fore in that moment but that already permeated my everyday perception.

The best explanation for what happened, as far I can see, is that I didn't feel safe at home, so when my mild variety of bipolar disorder blossomed of its own accord, the moods were more confusing, and perhaps more intense, due to my stressful circumstances. The solution was not to get rid

of my burgeoning depression or bipolarity, but to take them as wake-up calls that something in me was changing, and I needed to respond to those changes. The problematic creature was not the mania, but the urge to pretend that everything was fine. Trying to control my new feelings with my usual defense mechanisms didn't work. What actually worked was a long, slow effort change how I respond to conflict.

My natural response to conflict is to ignore it, and perhaps it is for that reason that my solution is precisely the opposite: don't ignore it. Real detective work, the calm, disinterested inquiry that Lawrence embodies, contrasts with John's furtive paranoia. This kind of work is about calmly, objectively, getting to the bottom of things, not about proving to myself that I'm happy, or laying blame on somebody else. When difficult feelings come up, I ask: Is this just a random funk, or is it something to do with my relationships or material circumstances? If it's the latter, is it *really* about that external thing, or is it actually about some unresolved conflict inside me? Do these feelings suggest that I ought to take some concrete action steps? If I had done this kind of work while I was still married, I would have seen that it wasn't my husband who was ruining my life, but me, by trapping myself in a gilded cage and insisting there was no way out. The answer was not literal suicide, but a kind of symbolic suicide in the form of ending that chapter of my life and embarking on a new one.

A healthy self is not one who doesn't experience conflict, but one who recognizes that that conflict is inevitable and irreconcilable. The urge to do away with our inner conflict is the suicidal urge to do away with the inevitable suffering of life. We all, at least at times, feel torn between realities, in part because the human brain is a mosaic of multiple decision-making systems, and sometimes those systems come into conflict. Sometimes one part of the brain wants to exercise and another part wants to flop on the couch. One part may love a certain friend while another part hates her. One part loves torture porn while another part feels ashamed of it. These conflicts are natural. It is up to us to decide how we will relate to them.

When we become experts at discerning the meaning of our inner conflict, we get something better than relief from it. We get wisdom. We get a sixth sense. Just like it's useful to get to know your own bodily odors or physical daily rhythms, it's also useful to know your mental activity, so that we can detect when something's wrong and act appropriately. A certain baseline level of mental conflict is natural, and it's good to be familiar with that baseline. That night with the ice cream, I was way beyond my baseline, but I wasn't sufficiently curious about myself to recognize that.

Embracing our internal contradictions is easier said than done. While our gurus and psychologists can point us in the right general direction, it is at the end of the day one's own unique struggle, and no one can tell us how to do it. Learning to live with oneself is an intense, personal journey, one that is to some extent beyond human control, since our circumstances play a big role in dictating how the mind operates. What worked for me will probably not work for you, since we are different people. What is shared is the necessity of finding a reason to fight our own battles.

What works for me is embracing my aberrant and alarming mental activity, after so many years of disowning it. I regard my suicide fantasies and other scary feelings as the bells of a well-functioning alarm system operating the way it's meant to. Perhaps controversially, I don't regard my suicide fantasies as a problem in themselves. If they suddenly start ramping up, that can be a clue that something in my life is a problem. The solution might be to talk to a certain kind of person, move into a certain kind of environment, walk away from a certain relationship or forge a new one. By paying attention to the messages coming from my body and my unconscious mind, I learn to make those kinds of decisions for myself.

For many years, including those when I was married, I was quite convinced that I didn't need psychology because, as far as I could tell, I was psychologically healthy. But I wasn't healthy, because I was in denial about my own inner conflict. I feel much healthier now, not because I don't have scary thoughts or moods, but because I keep tabs on them. So what does it mean to "love yourself" when different parts of the self undermine each other? This is a question without a good answer. In fact, it's

not even a good question. I didn't have to love my moods to start paying attention to them. Paying attention to them gave me a sense of instinct and direction, which empowered me to shape my own life. As I learned that my moods can help me make good choices, a natural respect for them emerged. For me, the question of "self-love" is not paramount. Perhaps a better question would be: How do *you* turn conflict into meaning?