

“He’s just a crazy old man. Just go, smile, tell him Merry Christmas, listen to his Fox News talking points, and then get out of there. You’ll make his day. Maybe his year. He may be an asshole, but he’s still your grandfather.”

My father’s words haunted me for the second Christmas in a row. This year, I once again decided not to visit my grandfather for the holidays on the pretext of being “busy.” I agonized over the decision, just as I did last year. If the old goat makes it to next Christmas, I’ll probably agonize over it again next year, too. It pained me to think of him alone and forgotten. I blamed myself for being selfish. He just sounds so lonely and pathetic that I sometimes can’t help calling him back, writing him a letter or even paying him a visit.

My grandfather never truly harmed me. He’s just an irritable, self-centered, racist, sexist, agitator, and is probably somewhere on the narcissism spectrum. In short, he’s kind of an asshole. Even though I rationally understand this, the picture my father sent of the two of them at Christmas dinner hit me like an F on a report card. I felt he might as well have captioned the photo, “Me and Dad at Christmas, with the empty chair where Hope would be sitting if she were a good person.”

I don’t just agonize over relatives across the aisle. I feel compelled toward social participation all the time. Text message? I have to respond. Friend I secretly hate invites me over? I’m there. A meeting struggles with dwindling attendance? I’m one of the regulars. When someone or something reaches out, I feel compelled to respond, to be nice, to show up. I have an extremely difficult time saying no. The more lonely and pathetic they seem, the harder they are to turn down.

When we think of habits, we tend to think of behaviors. We tend not to think of *perceptual* habits, even though they are just as important. At the root of any problematic behavior is a perceptual habit, that is, a habitual way of interpreting our experiences. When the world resembles a habituated simplistic fantasy, we play our part automatically. The brain conserves its resources by playing out a familiar response, rather than struggling to devise a new solution. If we are interested in breaking a bad habit, it is worth our time and effort to consider the perceptual habit driving the behavior. In this way, we become adept at noticing the moment that *precedes* the undesirable behavior. Awareness of our own *perceptual* habits is key to being able to pause, assess, and make more thoughtful choices.

Our dreams, fantasies, and favorite moments from our favorite works of fiction often reveal our own perceptual tendencies in an exaggerated form. Their climactic moments are highly stylized, with no pesky “facts” obscuring our view of our own interpretive apparatus. As a case in point, let’s look at my fantasy about ghosts, and see what light it sheds on my embarrassing peculiarity.

My daydream of the ghosts at Hogwarts is essentially a very biased, slow-motion retelling of the moment when I decide to visit grandpa. I was ten when the Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone movie came out and I loved it, dragging my dad to the theaters three times. This daydream came about sometime between that year and the year that I actually began reading the books, so somewhere between ages ten and fifteen, though it grew and changed over the years. In the daydream, John has the unique abilities to talk to, and be possessed by, ghosts. One ghost learns of this and desperately pesters John to use his powers to help the ghosts of Hogwarts to resolve their unfinished business. John agonizes over whether to ignore the ghosts or help them. In the end he does help the ghosts, because he pities them, because he sees so much of himself in them, and because he feels like he should.

In light of my personality, the whole daydream takes on a rather sinister meaning. It is essentially about the triumph of John’s irrational instincts over his reason. The lesson he learns, if anything, is that he was right to help the ghosts because in the end both he and the ghosts are happier for it. The daydream is really about justifying my problematic urge toward social participation. It is a caricature of my worldview, and it reveals the part I believe I’m meant to play.

The ghosts illustrate how I perceive anyone who expresses the slightest sign of loneliness. Like my grandfather as I perceive him, the ghosts are lonely, crazy, and desperate for contact. They ask for very little, just some tiny acknowledgement of their existence, and John feels like a selfish jerk for not giving it to them. The ghosts are imagined in such a way that not helping them is hard to justify.

Likewise, I unconsciously imagine my own grandpa in such a way that not helping him is hard to justify. He's all alone in the old folks' home at Christmas, poor lonely, crazy grandpa, waiting for a visitor. Would it kill you to just acknowledge him?

The ghosts' fundamental problem is that they lack bodies. John can help them by offering up his body. This is what the empty chair next to grandpa, the poorly-attended meeting and the party invitation all have in common. They want bodies. My triggering image is not the lonely *person*, but the lonely *ghost*. The empty seat. The missing body. It's worth noting that this is distinct from classic codependency, which is all about being helpful to the pathetic person. For me it's not so much about being helpful as it is about being physically present.

Winnie is an exceptional ghost, or perhaps the epitome of all the ghosts. The scene where Arthur, after endlessly pestering an exasperated John, finally shows him the way down to the dungeon where the little ghost girl is languishing, is perhaps the oldest and firmest part of the daydream. John goes down, deep underground, and finds her abandoned and alone in her own private hell. That is ultimately what convinces him to help the ghosts.

To John, the greatest kind of tragedy is to abandon the innocent child. This is the crime he tries to rectify when he represses his claustrophobia and helps Winnie. It is the crime he tries to rectify every time he surrenders his autonomy to help the other ghosts. It is the crime I try to rectify when I visit lonely assholes like my grandpa. But I commit this very crime in the process. As I try to prevent my greatest fear (abandoning the child), I actually bring it about (repressing my feelings). People like grandpa do not possess me or rob me of my feelings. But I unconsciously like to believe they do, because then I can feel good about repressing my feelings. I believe I am doing a good deed, but really I am only trying to justify the fantasy that justifies the deed. Perception and behavior work together to reinforce each other. This is typical of personalities in general.

If we wish to break our bad habits, it is important to realize that the undesirable behavior is inseparable from the perception that solicits the behavior. In a way, it is misleading to characterize the pattern as stimulus-response, or perception-behavior, as if it were two things. The pattern, or fantasy, may just as easily be regarded one thing. The perception and the behavior go together; if one is present, the other will be, too. As long as I perceive someone like my grandpa as a lonely ghost, I am already caught up in the fantasy, and the corresponding behavior is inevitable. We cannot simply discard undesirable behaviors and replace them with better ones, like so many Jenga blocks. The fantasy is a perceptual-behavior totality, and we must handle it as such.

Breaking a habit is a tall order because it requires no less than a change of mind. If we really pause and think about the phrase "change your mind," it starts to sound somewhat absurd. A change of mind is not just a choice; it's a change in the structure, responsiveness, or organization of the brain and/or the larger neuroendocrine system. We would not say "I changed my body" except under pretty radical circumstances. Most of the time, the body does what it's going to do with or without our permission. The same is true of the mind. You cannot really change your own mind, except about trivial things. In the case of big things, the mind is changed for us. We see something or learn something that stimulates a change of mind. For example, you may make a New Year's resolution to stop eating sausages for very good reasons, but your mind has not really changed. You may find it hard to stick to your resolution. However, if you visit a sausage factory and see how the sausage is made, it might suddenly be easy to "change your mind" about eating sausages. You didn't really change your mind; the sausage factory changed it. The matter was largely out of your control.

Most habits are like sausages. We will continue to devour them until the world shows us a good reason not to. Once it does, we can never look at the sausage in the same way again. Our perception of the sausage has changed from tasty treat to murder droppings. The fantasy is different, and the behaviors it compels are different. We have not merely swapped a bad behavior for a good one. Rather, the perceptual-behavioral totality has changed, and that is what makes the new behavior stick.

The way to break a habit is not by trying harder, wanting it more, or tricking yourself. It is by understanding an old situation through a *radically* new perspective. When we truly believe (which is, again, not really a matter of effort) that things are the new way, then the new behavior becomes logical and desirable. It's not about getting motivated. It's about being proven wrong.

How does one trade one's old worldview for a more desirable one? This is a question with no easy answer. There is no magic pill we can take to stop feeling annoyed by certain people, to stop feeling attracted to others, or to stop wanting certain things that feel good. It takes a lifetime to get to know our triggers and learn to feel our way through the subsequent options. It is always a matter of both luck and practice. So perhaps the question is not, "How can I change my habits?", but rather "How can I cope with the fact that I have so little power to change my habits?"

Faith is a way to cope. This does not need to be faith in God, merely faith in the good chance that someday life will throw us into a sausage factory. Faith means trusting that you are on the path of change, even if you haven't found your slaughterhouse yet. Faith means being willing to be proven wrong, and often that is the best we can do. If we want to change but we just can't, well, then maybe we just aren't ready to change yet. If we're not ready, then we're not ready. Trying to trick ourselves into doing something we're not ready to do is as unkind as it is unproductive. We must grant ourselves as many second chances as we would grant a child or a friend. There is no small power in accepting where we are.

When we do find the slaughterhouse, that is no time to abandon faith. We will still need faith to carry us through the trauma of the slaughterhouse. Faith will no longer be about waiting for the slaughterhouse, but about trusting that one day we will be through the slaughterhouse. We must trust that we will look back on the whole experience and say, "My suffering served a purpose. It taught me valuable lessons and made me a better person."

Sometimes our minds change overnight, but usually they need more time than that. The slaughterhouse will be disgusting and scary and horrible, and we will need some time to grapple with what we've seen. My other grandpa once literally worked in a slaughterhouse for a couple of weeks before he decided that it was too gross and he quit. So, it may take more than a day. Maybe it will take a year. If it's a really big issue, it may require years of grappling. It is not so much a matter of "seeing the light" as of seeing the dark, and reconfiguring our worldview to make space for that darkness.

In short, we must do the best we can with what we've got. As you might imagine, my process of understanding myself and my grandpa has been slow and jerky, with fits and starts. My feelings toward grandpa have always been a nuanced stew of love and visceral rage in varying proportions. Those feelings cannot simply be discarded in favor of a Christ-like serenity. The process has been non-linear and it has needed to be non-linear.

When my grandmother died, a lot of shit hit the fan. The circumstances were unusual and involved some unfortunate accidents. Some people in the family were blaming others for her death, or shaming others for handling the logistics badly. The whole fight was a clash of personalities, generations, and views about gender roles. Everyone was taking sides. Every man in the family took my grandfather's side, essentially blaming the women for not taking better care of grandma. I had been reading some feminist literature at the time, and those feminists' fiery words seemed to coax out an anger that I had been suppressing. Here's a snippet from a letter I wrote to the men of my family last year, but never sent:

*"It boggles my mind that you do not question why all the women in our family despise my grandfather, and all the men defend him. You tell yourself, 'These women are too emotional. I just don't understand them.' Here's an idea: FUCKING TRY. Sit in the comfort of your home and consider an idea. Consider that you are afraid to admit that we can see things you can't. That you have misjudged your fathers, your brothers, yourselves.*

*Every day I walk through a world that tells me I'm ugly, so that it can sell me some dumb shit I don't need. Then I go over to grandpa's and all he wants to hear about is my sex life. He sits with the other men in the living room, while I work with the other women in the kitchen. I play by his rules and I wear all the dumb shit, and if I'm lucky he'll still tell me I'm ugly. If I'm unlucky, he'll take me in his arms and kiss me and tell me I'm beautiful, and I stupidly stand there and thank him, while he looks me over like I'm a piece of meat.*

*Nobody, and I mean nobody, is entitled to my intimacy. I don't care how many gifts he's given me. If he expects something in return, it's not a gift. It's a contract I never signed."*

I never had any intention of sending the letter, but I found the process of writing it helpful. So I decided to write another letter, but to myself this time. Perhaps it will be helpful again.

Dear past-Hope,

Your rage toward your grandfather is justified. He is a complete jerk who deeply, perhaps unforgivably wronged your mother and grandmother. He certainly did wrong by you, too. You have every right to feel your pain and your rage. It would be harmful and unhealthy not to. But here's the thing: your grandfather also has every right to feel his rage toward his alcoholic mother and toward the father who abandoned him. And your father, brother, and uncles have every right to feel their rage toward you.

Growing up, you didn't have a lot of choice in whether to have a relationship with your grandfather. You were practically forced into it. In a better world, children wouldn't be forced into relationships with adults who treat them badly. Perhaps one day you'll work toward that better world. For now, though, this is not your task.

Grandpa doesn't need you. You need you. You have needed you for a very long time, only you couldn't see it. All you could see was a world populated by lonely ghosts who grasped and groped at your mind and body like it was all their property. You used these grasping ghosts to convince yourself that the autonomy you desired was unattainable, and that the only way to survive was to be numb. You cast these people as lonely and pathetic, so that you could feel good about yourself when you stepped back and let them use you. So you see, Grandpa used you for his own purposes, and you used him for yours.

Nobody is forcing you into this relationship anymore. Grandpa probably doesn't feel "entitled to your intimacy". You just unconsciously want to believe that he feels that way. Don't you see how this new, sassy attitude is just a re-hashing of the old submissive one? That you are merely casting him as a mean ghost instead of a pathetic one? He is not desperate for your presence, and he is not threatening your autonomy. This new self-righteous anger is a strategy to keep your perceptual apparatus intact, to relieve your brain of the burden of having to substantially restructure its habitual way of seeing.

For so long, you didn't even see that you were being oppressed. Now you see it, but you do not see by whom. It's you, Hope. It's just you. You have always been the oppressor, or rather your mind has been oppressing you by seeing things in one narrow way. That doesn't mean that you are at fault or that you are bad. On the contrary, by viewing grandpa in a habitual way and behaving in a corresponding self-protective manner, your brain was preserving itself as it's meant to do. No one can fault you for doing what you believed to be right. In fact, you could not have done otherwise if you had wanted to.

On the other hand, just because you are blameless does not mean that you don't have a project. And no, your project is not to fix the villains, or to persuade others that you are right. It is to deeply and courageously explore your desperation. Your world is falling apart, and this makes you feel angry, trapped and hopeless. Your newfound feminism feels like a way out of that desperation. However, I would caution you not to scramble so fiercely for a way out. Explore, try things, do your best, make

mistakes. But all the while, treasure your desperation, for that desperation is your gateway into a profound shift in thinking. You will know that feminism is your path, and for that matter any practice is your path, if it leads you *into* your desperation, not out of it.

I promise that there will come a day when all this ugly nonsense will make sense. It will be clear to you how to deal with grandpa. (In a word: don't.) You will flirt with other possibilities, you will fall back on old habits, but on the whole, you will see your path clearly and you will walk it confidently. This doesn't mean that things will be happier or easier. They will merely be better. The pain and the rage you feel now will not be wasted. They will have served their purpose, like a dusty accessory to a device long gone. You will look back on your current frustration and say, "That phase was necessary."

As you move through this period, you will gradually develop a new, nuanced perspective on your grandparents and your parents. They will be neither villains nor lonely ghosts. As you change your mind about them, you will necessarily change your mind about yourself. As they become complex people with complex motives, you too, will have to become complex. Without a villain, you'll no longer be able to play the hero or the victim. Instead, you'll have a smorgasbord of choices and a wealth of experiences to guide your choice.

Your task now is to practice a delicate balance of courage and patience. Faith is the key to that balance. Have faith in a better future, and you will find the courage to interrogate your own interpretations, thereby bringing about that future. Have faith in the necessity of your present struggle, and you will not exhaust yourself in the effort to heal everything today. You will find that people are not the groping, grasping caricatures you thought they were, and that you don't have to choose between numbness and despair. New avenues will open up. You will begin to understand how you work and how you might be reworked, and you will discover the autonomy you always craved. I see you battling with the contradictions in your worldview. You are determined to find a way out, up, or through. But the way out is *in*, Hope! Stop searching for a way out, and search instead for a way in!