

METANOIA — A NEWSLETTER ESSAY

There is an old fable about a farmer and his donkey that captures one of the greatest psychological truths about the human condition.

For years, the donkey faithfully carried heavy sacks of produce over a steep mountain pass to market. As demand for the farmer's goods increased, so did the burden. Hoping to maximise profit, the farmer doubled the load from two sacks to four. Though old and weary, his joints aching beneath the relentless weight, the donkey never complained. He simply kept walking.

One afternoon, while navigating the narrow mountain trail, the exhausted animal stumbled and fell into an abandoned pit.

The farmer looked over the edge and quietly weighed his options. Rescuing an ageing donkey would cost time and money. It simply wasn't worth it.

Instead, he walked into the nearby village and hired several labourers.

"Fill the pit," he instructed.

Armed with spades, they began throwing shovelful after shovelful of earth

onto the helpless animal below.

At first, the donkey cried out in panic.

Each heavy load of dirt felt like another sentence of death. The weight grew heavier. Darkness closed in. Escape seemed impossible.

Then something remarkable happened.

The donkey stopped crying.

With every shovel of earth that landed on his back, he shook it off.

Then he took one step upward.

Another shovel.

Shake.

Another step.

Again.

And again.

The very dirt intended to bury him gradually became the staircase that lifted him towards freedom. Eventually, to the astonishment of the farmer and his labourers, the donkey climbed over the edge of the pit and calmly walked away.

The dirt had not buried him.

It had elevated him.

The Pit We All Fall Into

Most of us eventually find ourselves standing where that donkey once stood.

Not in a physical pit.

But in a psychological one.

Perhaps it is burnout after years of relentless work.

A business that collapses.

A marriage that ends.

The loss of someone you love.

Financial pressure.

A diagnosis you never expected.

Or simply waking one morning feeling trapped inside a life you no longer recognise.

When we're already at our lowest, life rarely becomes easier.

More bills arrive.

More responsibilities appear.

More criticism comes our way.

More disappointments accumulate.

It feels as though the world has joined the labourers, throwing shovel after shovel of dirt onto our backs.

Our instinct is exactly the same as the donkey's.

We panic.

We resist.

We ask, “Why is this happening to me?”

Yet the greatest danger is not the pit.

The greatest danger is what we begin carrying inside our minds.

The Real Dirt

The donkey was never buried by soil.

He would only have been buried if he had chosen to carry it.

Our dirt rarely comes in the form of earth.

It comes as memories.

Regrets replayed thousands of times.

The opportunity we missed.

The relationship we lost.

The words we wish we could take back.

The mistakes we cannot undo.

Then comes another layer.

Future fears.

What if I lose my job?

What if my health deteriorates?

What if I fail?

What if everything falls apart?

Without realising it, we spend enormous amounts of energy carrying things that no longer exist and things that have not yet happened.

Yesterday cannot be changed.

Tomorrow has not yet arrived.

Yet these two places imprison millions of people every day.

The past pulls us backwards.

The future drags us forwards.

Between them, the present moment disappears.

And with it goes our peace.

The Prison Without Bars

Captain Jerry Coffee understood this better than most.

In 1966, the US Navy pilot was shot down over North Vietnam and spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war.

Locked inside tiny concrete cells, beaten, isolated and forbidden from speaking to fellow prisoners, the North Vietnamese believed they could crush not only his body but also his spirit.

Their strategy was simple.

Isolation.

Silence.

Hopelessness.

They wanted every prisoner to feel buried.

But Coffee and the other prisoners changed the rules of the game.

Using a simple system known as the Tap Code, they transformed the prison walls into a communication network.



The very walls designed to isolate them became the means through which they stayed alive.

A few gentle taps became words. Words became conversations.

Conversations became hope. The very walls designed to isolate them became the means through which they stayed alive.

Coffee later realised something that changed his entire life.

His captors could dictate where his body existed.

They could never dictate where his mind chose to live.

He refused to let it remain imprisoned in yesterday.

He refused to let it become terrified of tomorrow.

Instead, he chose today.

One conversation.

One prayer.

One act of courage.

One present moment.

Again and again.

Freedom Lives in the Present

The pit only truly has power in two places.

The past.

And the future.

Regret whispers, “If only...”

Fear whispers, “What if...”

Neither exists.

The only place where life is ever lived is now.

That is why the present moment is the birthplace of freedom.

Not because your circumstances immediately improve.

But because suffering loses much of its power when your attention returns to what is actually happening instead of what once happened or what might happen.

The present is where breathing happens.

Where choices are made.

Where courage is exercised.

Where love is given.

Where transformation begins.

The past and the future are not simply distractions from the dirt.

They are the dirt.

Every regret.

Every stress.

Every wound.

Every fear you rehearse before it has even arrived.

None of it exists anywhere except inside your mind, right now, in this present moment.

Which means only one place ever gives you the leverage to rise: here.

Only by becoming centred in the present can you step on top of the dirt meant to bury you.

Every shovel cast upon your head was designed to crush you, to bury you in despair and hopelessness.

Use it instead to climb.

Use it to step out.

How to Shake Off the Dirt

Every time regret lands on your shoulders...

Shake it off.

Learn the lesson.

Leave the weight behind.

Every time fear tries to convince you to live inside an imaginary future...

Shake it off.

Return to what is directly in front of you.

Do the next right thing.

Take the next step.

Every criticism.

Every disappointment.

Every setback.

Every failure.

Shake.

Step.

Shake.

Step.

Little by little, the very pressures designed to bury you become the

foundation upon which you rise.

The Mighty Leap

The donkey never argued with the farmer.

He never sought revenge against those throwing the dirt.

He simply transformed every burden into another step towards freedom.

Life offers us the same choice.

The past can become wisdom instead of regret.

The future can become preparation instead of anxiety.

Pressure can become growth instead of defeat.

The dirt will always come.

The question is whether you will carry it...

Or climb on top of it.

Because the secret was never escaping the pit.

The secret was discovering that the dirt itself was the staircase.



Shake it off. Step up.

*And one day, almost without noticing, you'll find yourself
standing in the sunlight once again — not because life stopped
throwing dirt, but because you learned that the present
moment is where freedom lives.*

*It is there, and only there, that metanoia begins: the profound
transformation of the mind that turns every burden into a
path upward.*

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