

Philosophical Consolation

Abstract: In November of 2012 my father was diagnosed with a severe form of brain cancer. In this paper, I outline how I try to use the teachings of two philosophers, Epictetus and Albert Camus, to try and find solace and consolation my father's diagnosis and fate.

My dad is a silly, stupid man. In 1997, he was hospitalized with chickenpox pneumonitis, contracted from yours truly. He was 35 at the time, smoked 20 cigarettes a day, but was otherwise healthy. Chickenpox pneumonitis does not care how healthy one is however, and it ravaged his body, placing him on death's door. He was able, miraculously, to fight back and quash the disease, ridding it from his body, but leaving him fairly battered, with half of the lungpower being wiped out. Yet he was able to live on, eventually going back to his normal life. He decided, however, to continue to smoke. Now when I say he "decided", I lie. It was never a real decision he made. He was a slave to it. He hid it from myself, mother and sister (poorly, I might add), and whenever asked about it, his justification was that he was never given the option to quit and never actively decided to, but was rather forced to, and as a human being, being told not to do something only makes the action infinitely more desirable. So he continued to smoke. Knowing this, I always knew in the recesses of my mind that my dad was not going to live to be an old man. I figured his lungs would give out when he was older, or god-forbid, he would get lung cancer, seeing as his lungs were already weak. Life has a morbid sense of humor however.

With his continued smoking, no ill effects came. He lived a mostly healthy life, otherwise, aside from his horrendous hacking smokers cough, and it never really troubled him. He never felt winded, he was never fatigued more than a 50-year-old man would be, and as the doctors have since told us, he was and still is in almost prime physical health. As any sensible healthy person does, he lived life normally and had a normal routine, waking up at 5:30 every morning to let the dogs out, making himself some coffee then heading off to work. Bumming about work for a while then coming home for 4 to take my sister to her tennis practice. While she was playing tennis, he would make dinner, mum would come

home around 6, 630, we'd eat, then the old foggies would go off to bed at 8 (something I teased them mercilessly for). This was what my dad did during the week; this was the routine that life had given him.

In early November last year, I spoke to Mum on the phone about the usual, mundane jibber jabber about how my classes were going that week, tests I said I attempted studying for, so on and so forth. After we spoke, I went on with my usual Friday afternoon Netflix binge, only to be quickly interrupted by another call from mum. Expecting she forgot to tell me something, I answered with a quick, curt "yes". Turns out Dad had collapsed and had a seizure when only my sister was in the house, and was currently hospital bound. A beautiful, sunny afternoon had quickly turned gray and dark. Naturally, I was frantic. I lived hours away and felt utterly impotent. Mum advised me to just stay put, and not make the drive down until we had heard more and the doctors had informed us what the problem was. So I just paced around my back garden, a feeling of uselessness descending over me. She phoned me back around an hour later saying my dad had had another seizure. Having one seizure can be just a blip of the brain, something that points to no real problems, but two seizures means there is a problem. Still, she said, don't come down tonight or tomorrow as nothing new will be happening, but rather come down on Saturday when he has a proper hospital room and not an ER cupboard. I did what any normal teenager would do at this point and invited my friend around, pulled out the bong and got stoned. Following this, I got quite drunk.

The next morning, with dry mouth and bladder fit to burst, I woke up deciding to just going to go home that day. I had no classes on Friday's and I could not cope with just sitting around doing nothing. I got in my car and was with my parents in the hospital by

lunch. I got filled in on the mass that had been discovered on his brain and was told that he was going to be having surgery. Time passed in the excruciating hospital pace, with nothing seeming to happen when everything should be happening. Time is at once excruciatingly slow in the hospital, and blindingly fast at the same time. Friends visited and left, and the day came to a close with no new developments. This new routine took place for three days until my dad underwent surgery.

He went into surgery and came out with a giant horseshoe scar on the back of his head, but otherwise fine. The doctors had removed a 2cm large tumor from his head and were sending it off to a lab somewhere to be analyzed. The best news would be that it was a benign tumor and he was free to live his life as if nothing had happened; the worst news was cancer. After days of waiting the news came back and it was about as bad as can be. My dad had been an unfortunate and totally random target of Glioblastoma Multiform, the most common and most fatal kind of brain cancer. Not good news. Mum told my sister and me the news while dad slept.

Needless to say, I wept when I heard. I am not a big crier these days. I cried a lot when I was a kid, but over the past few years, nothing. This worried me for a while. I thought myself some nihilistic, emotionless wretch. I would watch the saddest movies I could find, read the saddest stories and listen to the saddest songs, all to try and elicit some tears from me, some sort of physical manifestation of emotion. Nothing worked. This worry was now a worry no more. After spending what I thought were all my tears on my mum's shoulder, she took us into the bedroom and woke up my dad. I was wrong about the tears; apparently I had been saving up quite a lot for my dad's shoulder as well.

My family from Scotland flew in that day, and I was meant to be the one picking them up from the airport, but I was in no state to drive, so mum elected to do it instead. While she was off going to pick them up, I had an hour or two for introspection. I had now definitely cried all my tears and that was that. The sad times were over. It was time to put on a tough face and help beat the bugger. It was this initial time of introspection led me to think about that which I had learned in my rudimentary study of philosophy. The philosophers all tell us about the ways of life and the world, and we the dutiful students debate the merits and demerits of such path, always in the abstract. What had once been my abstract quickly became all too real. These ways of living and dealing with hardship laid out by men both ancient and young were suddenly of the most vital and utmost of importance to my life. No longer could I just quietly ponder between the different philosophies, dabbling here and there, flitting and flapping between different branches of thought. I was grounded. I need real help now.

The first to come to my aid harkened from the epoch of Stoicism, the ancient Greek thinker Epictetus. I thought of what he writes on dealing with hardship, and it now made sense to me, in a much more real and personal way than it had before. This is the first real, terrible, awful hardship to befall my previously well-off and easy life. Everything else in my past paled in comparison. It was almost as if the fates were toying with me, throwing into my face something I could actually apply my philosophical studies too. I would rather have stayed in the abstract, but now that I was in the personal I had no choice.

The very beginning of his Handbook, Epictetus opens with “some things are up to us and some are not...so remember, if you think that things naturally enslaved are free or that things not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset, and will

blame both gods and men.”¹ This is what I call hitting the nail on the head. Epictetus said exactly what I did when I first heard that my dad was going to die before I graduate college and will, more likely than not, never see his grandchildren. I cursed the world, I damned the fates, and tried to place blame where blame could not be placed. Nothing anybody did caused him to get brain cancer. It was not triggered by anything other than chance. It just so happened that my dad was unlucky, and all the cursing and damnation that I spread did nothing to change that. I just had to accept the situation for what it was and make the most of it. I could not cry about it anymore, I could not get angry about it, because all that would accomplish would be a pollution of my own mind with repellent thoughts. My judgments on the situation life had given my dad were what made everything so much more miserable than needed. The situation did not have to be as miserable as I was making it by crying about it. I had to be, to the best of my ability, what Epictetus called an educated person and “accuse neither someone else nor [myself]”², but rather just accept the situation for what it was.

This sounds such a callous and heartless approach, and that is what I thought of it when I studied it in the abstract in class. Putting it into practice however, and actually just accepting life at face value by just adapting to whatever it throws at you does in fact make things easier. It does make the situation better. It makes things easier than they could be. If I constantly wallowed over fate and the situation life had given me, the situation would instantly become worse, tenfold. Having just accepted the situation for what it is, I am able to live on, continue enjoying the rest of life while accepting the bad and coping with it as best I can. Epictetus, almost two millenia in the grave, has helped me deal with the worst

¹ Epictetus, *The Encheiridion* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 11.

² Epictetus, *The Encheiridion*, 13.

life can give a person. Epictetus was speaking directly to me; he was speaking for me, in ways I could not have understood before. This archaic yet timeless text had become a most personal thing, beyond all expectations. Epictetus helped me deal with this tragedy.

But on an objective scale, Epictetus did not speak to the situation. He never answered in a convincing way why my dad had gotten cancer. His belief that the universe is perfect and everything within it is perfect, if we only accept that, rang hollow and wrong. His views on dealing with tragedy are the greatest help, but his views on tragedy itself do not work at all. The belief that nature and the universe are perfect as they are is wrong. It is not perfect and harmonious that my dad got a form of cancer that is entirely random and can strike anyone. That does not make the universe appear “right”. Perhaps Epictetus would just say that I am wrong and I am putting my judgment onto life, but in certain situations it cannot be helped. Epictetus could nowhere convince me that it was proper that my dad should be selected at random to die. I had to look elsewhere to find an answer to that.

The person I found that resonated with me most on this aspect would come almost 1900 years after Epictetus: Albert Camus. Camus and his belief of the absurdity of life is how tragedy can best be accepted. Not that the universe is perfect and all things happen as they happen and thus are “right”, but rather that nothing ever happens for any semblance of reason and things just happen at random, with no rhyme or reason. Everything that happens just happens and thus life, the universe and everything, are just absurd. Things are just happening for no apparent reason. The only coalescing and true part of life is that things happen entirely at random with no cause, no pattern, nothing connecting them.

My trying to understand this universe is a pointless undertaking as “understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human”³. I was trying to humanize an inhuman situation. I was trying to make sense of something that could not be made sense of. My dad did not get cancer for any reason; there was nothing to place the blame at the feet of. It just happened because in the world things happen, because our world is absurd. No matter all the studies done on why people get cancer, no matter what new information people find about Glioblastoma Multiforme I had to “realize that if through science I can seize phenomena and enumerate them, I cannot, for all that, apprehend the world.”⁴ All the studies I could do on stage 4 brain cancer, and I have by now done more than I had ever imagined, I would never be able to find a convincing reason why this had happened to my dad at this time in this place. I would never find an answer to that, no matter how long I looked. I could never understand it, truly. It was something life had thrown in my face, so now it was here. I could come close to know all the facts about the cancer, I could learn about the different treatments to the cancer, but never would I be able to understand the “why?”. This was just one of life’s dreadful little things that added up to the absurdity of existence.

I know throughout the telling of my dad and cancer, I continually violate what the philosophers tell me to do and personify the cancer. I call it a monster, I call it dreadful, awful, and every vile name under the sun. I make human this none human thing, something Camus and Epictetus would critique me for. The reason for this is a most simple one: despite everything these philosophers tell us, despite all the reasoning they give to the way of the world, to the fact that it is not a human thing so I should not think of it as such, it is

³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.), 23.

⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 25.

human nature (another term philosophers hate) to personify. I cannot help thinking of the cancer as a monster. I cannot help but think of it as something that has cursed my family. It is human to be angry and sad when bad things happen. Epictetus has helped me tremendously in curbing this zealous hatred and fury, but no words would be able to extinguish it completely. I will never be truly accepting of the fact that my dad has gotten cancer. I will never be able to know this and live life as normal as possible. It has already changed my life dramatically. In every movie, even movies I have seen a hundred times previously, I now always notice the cancer patient. It is surprising how many movies have cancer in them; even movies that seemingly have nothing to do with cancer. It is almost as if filmmakers have decided to constantly remind people that cancer exists everywhere. I go into a film to immerse myself in another world and another story to escape the absurdity of my own life, but I am thrown out of this world every time when they pull out the cancer victim. My life has changed and I hate that fact. I cannot ever truly accept that fact. Perhaps this means I fail my lessons of Epictetus, but so be it. I do not want to totally accept and be all right with the fact that my dad has cancer. I do not want to just be hunky-dory with this blight. To just fully accept it feels inhuman, it feels robotic. I do wish to curb my emotions, but I do not wish to be fully absolved of them.

That hatred, that anger at the fact that life's absurdity happened to strike my dad, that we were just unlucky, is what fuels not only my fight, but my family's, to fight that bastard. The anger and sadness fuels us to enjoy to the fullest ability the last few years we have with my dad. If we just accepted it and live emotionless to the situation, we would be doing my dad an injustice. The man that would play beatin'-up with me every night, no matter how tired he was, the man that would have me pissing in my pants at the dinner

table in laughter, the man who would jump on the trampoline with us, swim in the pool with us, coach me in basketball even though he had no idea how to play, who gave me my first proper drink and taught me how to drive. To feel nothing when this man is given a death sentence is wrong. It is right that I feel angry about the fact that he will not play these games with my children. It is proper that I stay awake at night, overcome with sadness at the fact that he will probably not see me graduate from college. It is the human thing to do. I can fully accept the absurdity of the fact that it happened to be my dad that drew the short stick, but I cannot fully accept the fact that I should feel nothing for this. My dad has cancer and it makes me furious. I would tear down the skies and heavens to change it. I can't though. So I have to just try and accept it, but never fully. Never fully stomp down the emotions, lest I stomp down my humanity.

Citations

Epictetus. *The Encheiridion*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983. Print.

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 1955. Reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986.