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What it Means to Live in an Abusive Society, and Why We Do

Our Societies Resemble Victims of Severe Abuse. And We Think and Feel Like Them, Too.



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There's a line I hear regularly that leaves me a little bereft. It goes like this: "It's better than nothing!" I wrote recently, for example, that the Prez should have been impeached for his long list of horrific and neo fascist acts, not just minor-league million dollar corruption. Or that Liz Warren's healthcare plan was a little lacking. And in both cases I heard — as I do so often — many people saying: "it's better than nothing."

That way of thinking reveals deep and true about the state of us. It's not healthy logic for anyone to employ. It tells me that our society is an abusive one — and it's left us thinking precisely like victims of abuse.

How do abuse victims think? They say exactly the same thing: "it's better than nothing!" What they mean is that sure, the abuser might hurt them, physically, verbally, emotionally — but at least he (and it's usually a he) rewards them afterwards, with a little bit of affection, validation, closeness. Hence, "it's better than nothing" — sure, I get abused, but I also get something I need. Something that feels like intimacy, love, care, nurturance. Only it isn't. It's a vicious cycle. And the more that people allow themselves to fall into it, the more their self-worth erodes.

Because pretty soon, "it's better than nothing" becomes a justification for the abuser to do his absolute worst. You'll get some kind of meagre, flimsy reward — but you'll suffer worse and worse punishments to obtain it. (Hence, if you think about it a little carefully, "it's better than nothing" is logic that can justify any human atrocity, from slavery to rape. And increasingly in our societies — disturbingly — it is.) We settle for the slightly less bad, instead of aspiring towards the genuinely best — in us, in them, in anything — anymore.

Now. How does all that apply to our societies? How doesn't it is the real question.

If I asked you what a victim of abuse's life would look like, in terms of hard outcomes, you might say something like this. They'd be depressed, maybe suicidal. They'd feel powerless and helpless. Their lives would go nowhere but down and backwards. They'd lash out in rage, when they weren't escaping with some cheap thrill. And worst of all, they'd defend the very entities that had done all that to them. They'd shrink and wither away as people, and it would be painful just to watch.

And yet all that's precisely what we see, too, when we look at our society: it y looks exactly like a victim of prolonged, severe, sustained abuse. Suicide rates are skyrocketing, as are depression, anger, and anxiety — just like if someone was in an emotionally abusive relationship. Mobility has declined to the point that there's little chance of living a better life — against just like if someone was in an emotionally abusive relationship, which sabotaged their opportunities. Social relationships have completely broken down, young people are having less sex, and trust has imploded — just as in a socially abusive relationship, where people grow isolated. Life expectancy is even falling, just like you might expect if someone was in a physically abusive relationship.

I could go on. The point is simple. There's no escaping the fact that we live in profoundly abusive societies. Societies which neglect us, traumatize us, and scar us...just for existing. Societies in which



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the kind of harm that would be regarded as severe abuse if it happened in a relationship is just “the way things work”, the social contract, institutions, how we live. What else does it mean that life expectancy is falling, suicide is skyrocketing, opportunities are imploding, and hopelessness, anxiety, and despair are soaring? Societies are just organizations, much like families. And like a family can be an abusive set of relationships, so too can a society.

Abusive relationships take people’s possibilities away — worse, they make people party to taking their own possibilities away, by making them imagine: “I’m not worth really caring for. I’m not worth really loving. I’m just an ugly, meaningless, hollow thing. I have no intrinsic value at all.

This is the best I can get.”

This is the best I can get. Do you see how that logic mirrors exactly the line I hear — and you probably do too? “It’s better than nothing?” Maybe you even think so yourself. That’s OK. I’m not judging or shaming or blaming you. I have nothing but empathy and love for you. But I do want us to gently try to see ourselves more clearly.

What’s the real challenge for victims of abuse? It’s letting this false logic — “this is the best I can get!” — go. And replacing it with a more mature logic of true self worth: “this is the minimum a healthy relationship consists of, demands, needs.”

What is that minimum? It’s something like a lack of abuse, for one thing. Someone who doesn’t hurt you, physically, emotionally, verbally, socially. That’s the absolute bare minimum. But the true minimum is something more like: someone who genuinely considers you a being of intrinsic worth, and helps you to be your best self, who draws forth the best in you. There’s a simpler way to put that: someone who never, ever allows you to settle for whatever meagre best you can “get”, but encourages and nourishes and supports you to become the best, truest, wholest that you can be.

That is what a healthy relationship is, isn’t it?

When I look at our societies carefully, they haven’t made that psychological leap, yet. They don’t hold their leaders to that standard. If they did, they wouldn’t say: “this is the best we can get! Let’s take it!!” — they’d say: “We deserve better than the threadbare best you are willing to give us. This is still an unhealthy relationship. Maybe even an abusive one. The best that you are willing to give us isn’t good enough, sorry.”

Abuse victims, too, though get trapped in their relationships. If only the human mind were wise enough to say: “The best you can give me isn’t good enough, sorry”, every time someone was a victim of abuse. But it isn’t. The human mind is a fragile thing, that must be handled with delicacy and gentleness. People get trapped in abusive relationships precisely because their moral logic grows corroded. The more that they settle for the meagre rewards they get, and put up with the abuse, the more their self-worth erodes, and the less they think of themselves as worth anything like genuine love, care, or concern at all. “He gives me the best I can get!” — how many abuse

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victims have spoken those words. What they're really saying is: "That's all I'm really worth! I deserve to be punished and hurt and victimized."

Maybe they feel that way because someone abandoned them when they were young. Someone who should have cared for them betrayed them. You can take me as an example. I was viciously abused as a frail, sickly stick-thin brown kid — and all my teachers, coaches, principals looked the other way, when they weren't cheering it all on. I think I'm better now — but it took a very, very long time for me to think of myself as someone who wasn't worthy of just "the best they could get", someone who had little intrinsic or inalienable worth. Those scars linger, my friends. To outgrow abuse is the project of a lifetime.

Let me connect all those dots.

It's no surprise that so many of us think precisely like victims of abuse. That is what we are. We have lived in profoundly abusive societies our whole lives long. Societies which deny us the things that we should consider basic human rights — like healthcare, retirement, savings, income, dignity — and instead pit us against one another in endless lethal combat for them. That is why our societies resemble severely abused people in terms of hard social outcomes.

Hence, we've ended up like many abuse victims. We live in constant hope not of a genuinely healthy relationship — but just of slightly less abuse, or maybe just bigger rewards, for the same level of abuse. We've come to think we're not worth a genuinely nurturing, healthy society. The idea that a healthy society is one that provides a certain basic set of things to everyone — and that is the absolute bare minimum of what a healthy society is — seems totally beyond us. All we deserve is the "best we can get." We aren't capable yet of saying: "the best you're willing to give us isn't good enough, sorry."

We deserve better, my friends. Despite our mistakes and our failings. We deserve better not just because we're "productive" or "resilient" or "good" — but simple because we are. Because every being does. Every being deserves to be free to live to its fullest possibilities. My puppy does, my favorite old tree does, the soil becoming the rain becoming the sea does. And so do we. When we say "this is the best we can get", we should examine ourselves, for those scars of abuse I know so well. The feeling of inadequacy, worthlessness, estrangement, emptiness. The logic that a life of genuine happiness, meaning, purpose, fulfillment is something for other people — not for you, not for us. We must just settle for the "best we can get."

We all deserve to be free to realize ourselves. Sometimes — often, in fact — the best you can get isn't good enough to meet that bar. You are truly loved and seen and held by someone only — only — when and if that bar is met. Remember that. Call it eudaimonia. Make it a rule for every relationship you ever have — whether personal or social. It just might change your life.

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