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Product is the Excrement of Action

Jeanette Winterson

Honestly, when was the last time you spent a whole day just enjoying what you were doing and feeling? Enjoying it solely for its own sake, without thinking about the future or worrying about the long-term consequences? When was the last time you spent a whole month living that way? Do you have a hard time forgetting about your responsibilities, your goals, your productivity, and just being in the present?

Today, our lives revolve around things. We measure our worth in terms of our material possessions: in terms of our control over things outside ourselves. We gauge our success in life in terms of our “productivity”; that is, our ability to make these things. Our social system revolves around the production and consumption of material goods more than anything else. Even when we are not thinking about material objects, we represent our lives to ourselves as things: we consider our accomplishments, our future prospects, our social position... anything but how we actually feel. “The end justifies the means,” we say; that is, the products of our actions, the end results of our lives, are more important to us than the process of living itself.

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But products are the excrement of actions. Product is what is left over when the dust settles and the pulse returns to normal, when the day is done, when the coffin is laid in the ground. We do not exist in the settling dust or the scorecard; we are here in the present tense, in the making, the doing, the feeling. Just as we try to immortalize ourselves by fleeing into the world of fixed, deathless images, we try to externalize ourselves by thinking in terms of the results of our actions rather than our experience of the actions themselves. After all, it's so complicated to have to worry about whether you are really enjoying yourself, how you are feeling in the moment. It is easier to focus on the results, the hard evidence of your life; these things seem easier to understand, and easier to control.

Modern society is centered around the production and distribution of material goods, rather than the happiness and satisfaction of its participants. thus Modern man thinks of his life in terms of what he has "to show for it," rather than considering the life itself.

Of course today's average worker is used to thinking about the ends rather than the means. He spends most of his time and energy working at a job that in all likelihood does not fulfill his dreams. He looks forward to payday every two weeks, for he counts on his paycheck to make sense out of his life: without it, he would feel like he was wasting his time. If he didn't look at the "consequences" of his actions as a justification for them, life would be unbearable — what if he constantly considered how he was feeling as he bagged groceries, or asked himself if he was having fun every moment he struggled with the fax machine? Insofar as his everyday experience of life is tedious and meaningless, he needs to concentrate on the coming weekend, the next vacation, his next purchases, to fend off insanity. And eventually he is bound to generalize that mode of thinking to other parts of his life: he comes to evaluate possible actions according to the rewards they offer, just as he would evaluate a job according to the wage it offers.

Thus, the present has lost almost all significance for modern man. Instead he spends his life always planning for the future: he studies for a diploma, rather than for the pleasure of learning; he chooses his job for social status, wealth, and “security,” rather than for joy; he saves his money for big purchases and vacation trips, rather than to buy his way out of wage slavery and into full time freedom. When he finds himself experiencing profound happiness with another human being, he tries to freeze that moment, to turn it into a permanent fixture (a contract), by marrying her. On Sundays he goes to church, where he is told to do good deeds in order to one day receive eternal salvation (as Nietzsche says, the good Christian still wants to be paid well), rather than for the sheer pleasure of helping others. The “aristocratic disregard for consequences,” that ability to act for the sake of action that every hero possesses, is far beyond him.

It is a cliché that men and women of middle class and middle age have a hard time putting aside their insurance policies and investment programs to seize the moment; but, all too often, we, too, end up exchanging present for future and experience for souvenirs. We save mementos, trophies, boxes of keepsakes, old letters, as if life can be gathered, stored up, frozen for later... for later? For when? Life is here with us now, running through us like a river; and like a river, it cannot be held in place without losing its magic. The more time we spend trying to “save it up,” the less we have to throw ourselves into it.

The worst of us, in fact, are the radicals and artists. All too often, we “revolutionaries” expend our efforts thinking and talking about a revolution “that is to come,” rather than concentrating on making revolution in the present tense. We’re so used to thinking in terms of production that even when we try to make life into something immediate and exciting, we still end up centering our efforts around an event in the future—one that we may not even live to see. And like factory supervisors, we worry more about our productivity (the number of new believ-

ers recruited, the progress of the “cause,” etc.) than about how we and our fellow human beings are feeling and living. Artists suffer from this tendency most of all; for their vocation itself depends on making products out of the raw material of real-life experience. There is something of the capitalist’s lust for domination in the way that artists mold their emotions and experiences into forms of their own making through the act of expression; for the expression of feelings and sensations, unique and unfathomable as they are, always consists of a kind of simplification. It isn’t enough for the artist to just experience and appreciate life as it really is; she comes to cannibalize her life for what is really a career, a series of products outside herself, even adjusting her life for her career’s sake. Worse, she may find that she cannot make love on a rooftop at daybreak without planning out the excellent scene for her novel (excrement!) that this will make for.

Certainly, excretion is a healthy and necessary function of the soul as well as the body, and there is a place for art in our lives as a way to pour feeling back into the world when the heart is full to overflowing; but if you keep trying to do it after it is unnecessary, you eventually force out your heart and the rest of your insides (remember the fairy tale of the goose and the golden eggs?). We must put life and experience first, we must meet the world with only this in mind, as fresh and innocent as when we were children, with no intentions to cannibalize, categorize, organize, or simplify the profound infinities of our experiences. Otherwise, we will miss what is most vital, most beautiful, most immediate in this world, in our search for things that can be pressed flat and preserved “for all time.” Imagination should be used first and foremost to transform everyday reality, not just to make symbolic representations of it. How many exciting novels could be written about the sort of lives that most of us lead these days, anyway?. Let us make living our art, rather than seeking to make mere art out of our lives.

If we ever find happiness, it will be in the process of living, of doing what we want and living out our dreams, not in the products of our lives. If we don’t pause and enjoy the present now, when will we? So let’s stop “making history” — we’re all so obsessed with “making a mark” — and start living. That would be a real revolution. Let’s live for today, for our lives, not our “results”!

“Sometimes,” said Julia, “I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there’s no room for the present at all.” “But I tell you, Henri, that every moment you steal from the present is a moment that you have lost forever. There’s only now.”