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True grit

by Michael Fontaine

Which is worse, pain or disgrace? The more you think about it, the less obvious the answer is. Physical pain hurts a lot, of course. But disgrace—shaming, demonization, abandonment, isolation—hurts, too. If you were forced to choose between the two, which would you pick?

This isn't a new question. In fact, it preoccupied the great Roman statesman Cicero at the lowest point in his life. A decade and a half after his triumphant peak in politics, which saw him elected Consul, extolled for thwarting a coup, and hailed as Father of the Nation, Cicero found himself exiled, dishonored, and divorced. When his beloved daughter, Tullia, died suddenly after giving birth, he lapsed into a profound depression. As he sought to recover, he holed himself up in a villa and penned one of the world's first books on resilience, grit, and mental health. Titled *Tusculan Disputations*, it is a series of five dialogues on facing down death, coping with inner turmoil, and clarifying one's highest priorities in life. The book seems to address a readership of college-age youth. At its center, it forces us to ponder tough questions about the nature of grief. And, as a remarkable new translation by Quintus Curtius shows us, the problems it addresses are as timely and relevant as ever.

Many people are surprised to hear that Cicero wrote a book on mental health. If you're one of them, you might be even more surprised by how he characterizes loss and sadness. "If a person can shake off grief," says Cicero, adamantly, then

> it is also possible not to gratify it in the first place. We must conclude, then, that mental anguish is a choice, something adopted voluntarily and derived from a sense of internal obligation.

If that conclusion sounds unorthodox, you'll be even more surprised at how he proposes to treat it:

> Since the mind has already discovered the art of treating the body, who can agree with the idea that the mind cannot cure *itself*? . . . There surely exists a medicine for the soul—it is philosophy. We must seek its help not from the outside, as we do with bodily ailments. We must exert ourselves intensely, deploying all our efforts and powers, so that we can act as our *own* healers.

Cicero does not believe anxiety or profound sadness are medical illnesses. In his view, mental disorders originate in bad value judgments: we get overexcited about some good things and overly down about some bad things. Those "misjudgments," he thinks, cause us to feel elation, lust, fear, and anxiety. For Cicero, the cure is not medicine or drugs but self-help—or, as he calls it, philosophy.

That brings us back to the question about pain versus disgrace, because it makes us think hard about our judgments. Would you disgrace yourself to avoid physical pain? Conversely, would you endure something painful for the sake of honor?

There's no point in saying you can't do the latter, says Cicero, because athletes and soldiers do it all the time. They show us that physical pain is *not* the worst thing in the world, *not* the *summum malum*. It may not be easy, but athletes and soldiers prove it *is* possible to push through pain for a greater good. And if we can, Cicero says, we should.

By analogy, Cicero continues, we can begin to take responsibility for our reactions to adversity. He thinks we can translate the insight (if such it is) about physical pain to emotional pain—to grief, anxiety, sorrow, and dread—and reset our highest values in life. Because if sheer survival at any cost is *not* our paramount concern, then a life of fortitude and endurance is the key to lasting happiness and inner peace. As he sums it up,

> Let this principle guide your behavior: an embracing grandeur of soul, a certain loftiness of the spirit that reaches to the skies, which is best expressed by despising and looking down on pain, is the one thing in this world that surpasses all others in beauty. It becomes even more magnificent if it does not depend on the public's endorsement, and is not motivated by a desire to win praise, but instead generates its own pleasure by itself alone. . . . No theater for virtue is greater than one's conscience.

Why does no one read *Tusculan Disputations* today? Strange title aside, is it because Cicero's views are obsolete in our clinical and scientific age, or because they are merely out of fashion? Or is it something else altogether?

In the Enlightenment, men like Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and Thomas Jefferson revered Cicero for his noble, no-nonsense approach to philosophy. They saw his works as a repository of ancient truths and timeless insights before Christian theology enveloped and obscured them. Nowadays, Cicero is too often thought of as little more than a vain and long-winded speechmaker. It seems to me there are three main reasons for this.

First, students read too many of Cicero's speeches and not enough of Cicero's philosophy. Yet those speeches are designed merely to win arguments, whereas his philosophy is designed to get at the truth. Second, students read too much Cicero in Latin and not enough Cicero in translation. Cicero's Latin is demanding. It is hard to follow an argument if you're constantly reaching for a dictionary, grammar book, or commentary. Before long, students are making jokes about finding the verb in his complicated sentences, and so on, to the point where they cannot see why the text

might be worth understanding. Yet Cicero's philosophy demands a certain sincerity and maturity, not irony or cynicism. Third, too many translations are just plain bad. But now a step has been made in the right direction, as the new translation I have quoted above brings a compelling immediacy to the text. It is the latest success by an American essayist and trial lawyer who writes under the suitably Latinate name Quintus Curtius. Over the last few years, Curtius has published impressive translations of Cicero's *On Duties*, *Stoic Paradoxes*, *On Moral Ends*, and other works. (I have corresponded with him since these translations first came to my attention, and we discussed his latest translation while it was in the works.)

Cicero's arguments for resilience are challenging, and his by-the-bootstraps recommendations will not work for everyone. But, says Cicero, they worked for him. By refreshing *Tusculan Disputations* after a century of neglect, Curtius has brought a forgotten and contentious side of Cicero's thinking back to light.

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