

Lessons from the Hydra

Becoming Better through Adversity

By

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We're all familiar with the terrifying 1975 movie *Jaws* about a gigantic man-eating shark terrorizing vacationing swimmers at a beach resort. As long ago as 1975 seems (I was only 11 years old then), horror stories about sea monsters are ancient and almost universal. Psychology would suggest these stories and myths indicate a fear of our own unconscious, of the unknown things we wish to keep suppressed. Maybe so, but, applying Occom's razor, I'd suggest a more likely interpretation is that we live on a planet that is mostly water and know too little of its deepest mysteries and worse dangers, and these aquaphobic myths are rooted in our fear of its real risks, just as stories of big bad wolves are meant to teach children to be wary of real strangers.

I grew up near the beach in Pacifica, California, and walked along its shores nearly every day of my young life. But I never learned to swim because I didn't have access to a pool and understood early on to stay out of the very ocean for which my community was named. For one thing, it was freezing. Occasionally, during a hightide, I had to remove my shoes and socks and allow its chilly waters to lap against my feet, which would soon make them numb enough that I had to get off the beach entirely. There were a few diehard surfers who would occasionally brave its frigid temperatures in wetsuits, but you were more likely to spot a lone sealion than a surfer where I grew up. Even when you did, they hardly resembled the tan and wet athletes California's beaches are associated with. Even worse was the dangerous undertow we were constantly warned about. Signs were post everywhere and we occasionally heard stories of experienced swimmers dragged under and drowned by its inescapable pull. I loved growing up on the beach. I loved its beauty, its sounds, and its sands, but I respected and feared it and have no trouble taking myths of sea monsters literally.

Indeed, if I were going to write such a horror story, it wouldn't be about sharks but about Moray eels. If you haven't seen one, they resemble something like a large dog-headed snake with a powerful jaw, protruding snout, beady eyes, and razor-sharp teeth, and are terrifying to look at. The Moray eel is the only creature on Earth known to have an extra jaw, which it uses exclusively to restrain its prey, kind of like the two-jawed creature in Ridley Scott's *Alien* movies. They are usually the top predator in their habitats, which are to be found in ocean waters all over the world. Any creature unfortunate enough to encounter one is likely to encounter many because they hunt in packs. They also expertly camouflage themselves and are unlikely to be seen until it's already too late.

I suspect many sea monster legends, including the one I want to talk about today, Hydra, are ancient horror stories based on Moray eels. I think the Greco-Roman myth of Hydra was the *Jaws* story of its day. If you look at the heads of Hydra as depicted in ancient paintings and statues, they look a lot like a school of Moray eels, dog-headed sea-snakes. Hydra, for those

unfamiliar with the myth, is a sea monster with nine such heads. Even worse, if it loses one head, two more instantly grow back in its place. I imagine this must be what its like for any creature futilely attempting to defend itself against a school of Moray eels, no matter how much it fights back, they just keep coming.

Hydra has since become a metaphor sometimes used to describe any overwhelming and multifaceted problem. I'm guessing this is how President Biden feels about what's happening with Russia right now, that no matter what he does there's another head or two coming at him. He wants to help Ukraine and understands President Zelenskyy's pleas for direct military intervention. That's one head. There's also the frightening face of potential war between the world's two greatest nuclear powers. That's another. And, as a politician, every time he makes one decision, cutting off a head, if you will, multiple heads emerge to attack him for doing so or for not having done something else. President Zelenskyy, and Putin for that matter, are fighting Hydras of their own. The more they do, the more difficult the battle becomes.

But we don't have to be world leaders to know what this is like, especially nowadays. Just a short time ago many of us recall how devastated we felt after the election of a President we considered among the most incompetent and dangerous in American history. Then, amidst his ineptitude, we came to face one of the worst global pandemics in modern history, only to have him do all but ignore it and unnecessarily turn it into a politically divisive excuse to further divide our nation. As if this weren't bad enough, our country has by far had more cases and deaths than any in the world because so many Americans have refused to take it seriously, to be vaccinated, or to simply wear masks in public places. And just when we do think we're finally getting it under control, another variant emerges. After all this, upon his narrow political defeat, Trump refused to concede and encouraged an attempted coup in our Nation's capital that should have disturbed us all. On top of this and our other major concerns, like global warming, rising inflation, a housing crisis, a logjammed global supply chain, conservative states turning back the clock on women's rights, we are now facing the threat of World War III. This feels like Hydra to me, like we're fighting a school of Moray eels: Just as we think we've defeated one razor-toothed serpent, even more are upon us.

In Greek and Roman mythology, defeating Hydra is one of the twelve labors of Hercules, the half-man, half-god superhero of the time. He does finally get Hydra under control but later is accidentally poisoned by a bit of its deadly blood, which, according to some versions of the myth, causes the death of this ancient superman. So, Hydra may be the true victor of the story after all.

Yet the ancient stoic philosopher Epictetus had another take on the story. "What do you think would have become of [Hercules]," he asked, "if there had not been a lion, as in the story, and a hydra and a stag and a boar and unjust and brutal men, whom he drove forth and cleansed the world of them? What would he have done, if there had been nothing of

this sort?”¹ His point being that nobody would ever have heard of Hercules had it not been for his twelve trials, including Hydra. His life would have been uninteresting and unremarkable. Hydra, like all of his challenges, helped make Hercules who he was. Learning to overcome them is what made him great. He would have been nothing without them.

How many of us would rather avoid our challenges, sometimes ignoring them altogether, as if by doing so they will magically go away. Yet, by not facing them, they only worsen until they overwhelm us. The Greenhouse Gas effect is such a Hydra that for too many decades conservative lawmakers have ignored, initially calling it a hoax, then by falsely claiming scientists disagree that it’s happening, then that they disagree about its causes, then by saying if we try to fix it we’ll lose jobs, and now it is upon all of us, then entire world, because of their willful ignorance. As I already alluded, the same is true regarding the Party Leadership’s nonresponse to COVID-19, which, again, has prolonged its presence in our nation and made its deadly impact far worse here than anywhere else in the world, which should be of concern and an embarrassment to all Americans.

These days, on the extreme Left, there is an insidious and fascist mindset growing that presumes it can establish equality by stifling freedom, which is the very opposite of what Liberalism means. Yet anyone who dares mention this is immediately demonized and punished in an effort to discourage and silence all dissenting voices. This too is ignorance, upheld by violence, in order to pretend those seeking to erode free thought and free discourse remain goodhearted and fair-minded. Others, fearing the consequences of speaking up, just keep quiet, convincing themselves “this is just a phase,” not unlike those conservatives who say climate change is “cyclic.” Worse of all, as far as I’m concerned, are those who don’t take a stand because they think they’re being nice. They believe conflict is to be avoided at all costs. But in the end, they will be as unremarkable and, worse, ineffectual as a potential hero that nobody ever hears of because they were too nice to face the challenges before them, as a Hercules who doesn’t face his Hydra.

For it is not our problems and challenges alone that make us who we are and that have the potential of making us great, but how we take them on. And by “great” I don’t mean they makes us famous or legendary—that’s not a worthy goal—but that they help us fully unfold as individuals, they help us achieve our greatest potential, they help us become the best we can be. Ignorance and silence and playing it safe, on the other hand, stifle us. For these, ignorance, silence, and safety is the Hydra that life is calling them to overcome.

We can learn a lot about the best way to live from Hydra’s example. Philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb uses this mythical figure to epitomize what he means by the title of his bestselling book, *Antifragile*. In *Antifragile*, a word Taleb has coined, he tells us there is no word in the English language, or any other language for that matter, to connote the opposite of the word *fragile*. Some would say words like “resilient” or “robust,” but Taleb reminds us that something fragile becomes worse when it’s damaged, it doesn’t remain the same. If a

teacup falls on the floor, it gets broken to pieces and is no longer of use. If something robust, like a metal cup falls, it's not likely to be damaged at all. But to truly be the opposite of fragile such a cup would have to become better from its fall, not merely remain the same. Antifragile is the word he uses to describe things that benefit and become better from adversity, like Hydra. Hydra doesn't merely grow a new head when one is lost, but two new heads in its place. If all nine of its heads get lopped off, it will become an eighteen-headed monster and grow exponentially better the more wounded it is. That's antifragile.

Taleb mentions a couple of other myths to better highlight the differences between fragility, robustness, and antifragility. The first of these is the Greco-Roman myth about the sword of Damocles, which dangles over his head, held only by a single horse's hair. Now that's fragility and, unfortunately, things don't end well for Damocles. Another is the Egyptian myth of the Phoenix that is reborn from the ashes of its own death. That's an image of robustness because Phoenix returns just as it always has been, no worse and no better. But the Hydra emerges exponentially better the more it is injured. That's antifragile.

Taleb goes on to say that antifragility, not fragility or robustness, is the true nature of life, yet there is no word for it. "There is no word for 'antifragility' in the main known languages," he says, "modern, ancient, colloquial, or slang ... Half of life—the interesting half—and we don't have a name for it."² This is a remarkable point to grasp, that most of us go about life, which advances because of its antifragility, by trying to avoid its problems and challenges which are driven by uncertainty and randomness. In other words, the uncertainty we fear and the randomness we try to control, is a denial of the very processes necessary for us to be fully alive. "In fact," Taleb says, "the most interesting aspect of evolution is that it only works because of its *antifragility*; it is in love with stressors, randomness, uncertainty, and disorder—while individual organisms are relatively fragile, the gene pool takes advantage of shocks to enhance its fitness."³ What doesn't kill us really does make us stronger.

Our muscles, for example, are antifragile because they become bigger and stronger only by first breaking them down, just as the more heads Hydra loses, the more it gains. Vaccine science, which we're all acutely aware of these days, is another example. It's based on the understanding that we can gain greater immunity by exposing ourselves to the illnesses we want to avoid. We treat allergies in the same way, by exposing patients to small amounts of the substances they are allergic to. Taleb uses the examples of hormesis and Mithridatization. Hormesis refers to the body's ability to become healthier when exposed to small doses of toxins and other stressors, similar to the way stressing our hearts and lungs with rigorous exercise does. Mithridatization is named after the Persian King Mithridates IV who, after his father's assassination, "got himself protected against poisoning by ingesting sub-lethal doses of toxic material in progressively larger quantities."⁴ This method is known to have been practiced by others, like Agrippa, Emperor Nero's mother who feared her

notorious son planned to poison her. It worked so well that Nero had to resort to a less stealth form of assassination.

Today we understand the three killers, cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer's, are caused by inflammation, which worsens as we grow older because we accumulate more senescent cells, those, so-called, zombie cells, that don't do anything but build up in our bodies. The easier we take it on our bodies, the more likely these inflammatory cells are to accumulate. This is so because our natural processes for removing them don't kick in because our bodies don't understand that we are endangered. To activate our survival circuit, which puts certain enzymes into action to help rid our bodies of these zombie cells and to repair the damage they do to our DNA, our bodies have to first feel stressed. To accomplish this, today's longevity scientists suggest we should routinely trick them into thinking we are starving, experiencing hypothermia, and exhausted, which can be accomplished, respectively, through intermittent fasting, naturally lowering our body temperature with cold walks and showers, and through vigorous exercise. As Harvard geneticist Dr. David Sinclair says in his bestselling book, *Lifespan*, "A bit of adversity or cellular stress is good for our epigenome because it stimulates our longevity genes."⁵

Interestingly, these were the same disciplines the stoics practiced a couple thousand years ago, not because they understood the science of their benefits as well as we do, but because they understood in general how facing adversity makes us better. According to one of his military commanders, Socrates, whose life inspired the Stoics, "walked out in that weather, clad in just such a coat as he was always want to wear, and he made his way more easily over the ice unshod than the rest of us did in our shoes."⁶ The Roman Stoic, Musonius Rufus, and avid exerciser, said those who are unwilling to exert themselves are unworthy of any good since, "we gain every good from toil."⁷ By this logic, the good life many seek is not possible without stress and strain, for these are the forces that give birth to the good we want. Musonius also said, "How much more fitting ... it is that we stand firm and endure when we know that we are suffering for some good purpose, either to help our friends or to benefit our city, or to defend our [spouses] and children, or, best and most imperative, to become good and just and self-controlled, a state which no [one] achieves without hardships."⁸

Antifragility can benefit many other kinds of systems too, like education, economics, relationships, and so forth. As the author of a banned book, I know personally how such adversity can improve a book's chances of being read and of making a real impact, and the benefit of thicker skinned gained from being condemned and maligned. As the Roman historian Tacitus said, "through persecution the reputation of the persecuted talents grows stronger."⁹ This particular expression of antifragility is nowadays known as the "Streisand effect," so named after singer Barbara Streisand sued a website to remove pictures of her home, which ended up drawing enormous online attention to the website and the photos.

We can be like Streisand, or book banners, or those who would seek an easy life by avoiding conflict, difficulties, and challenges by ignoring the Hydras in our lives. Or we can become the Hydra by developing the ability to become better and stronger because of the problems we must tackle. The difference is one of simple mindset. We can see our struggles as the content of our lives, or merely as the context in which we live our lives. Our problems can be what happens to us, or we can be what happens to them.

Today we live at a difficult time with many unprecedented challenges, some of them so overwhelming and multifaceted that taking them on seems as pointless as fighting off a school of Moray eels. We can be their victims and lament being surrounded by such a nest of vicious foes, or we can determine to be our best and to be at our best no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in, nor how we might end up. Epictetus began his handbook with the words, “Some things are up to us and some are not up to us,”¹⁰ because he knew understanding this is the basis of wisdom and of living a good life. We cannot always choose the challenges we must face, but we can choose how we will respond to them, and if we respond with courage, and determination, and maybe even a little gratitude, we are likely to emerge from them better than ever.

¹ Oates, W.J., ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. 235.

² Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *Antifragile*, Random House, New York, NY, 2014, p. 32f.

³ Ibid., p. 67.

⁴ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵ Sinclair, David A., *Lifespan: Why We Age and Why We Don't Have To*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 2019, p. 112.

⁶ Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Philosophy: History & Problems*, 3rd Edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, NY, 1971, 1983, p. 35.

⁷ Bellinger, Alfred R., *Yale Classical Studies*, Volume 10, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1947, p. 59.

⁸ Bellinger, *ibid.*, p. 59.

⁹ Mchangama, Jacob, *Free Speech: From Socrates to Social Media*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 2022, p. 28.

¹⁰ Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009p. 86.