The Oedipus Path
Learning To Successfully Limp Along
By
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March 8, 2019

When I was 9-years-old I stepped on a toothpick which eventually led to blood poisoning and surgery to have it removed. The operation left an open hole, shaped like a funnel, running all the way through my right foot, from top to bottom. As an open wound, it required daily care and medication to prevent it from becoming infected, a task my mother took care of, plus routinely soaking my footed in Epson's Salt. I found looking at it so horrifying that I refused to do so until it eventually began to close over, filling with the scar tissue that remains to this day, ironically in the shape of an open eye that now looks up at me.

Once I could begin walking on it again, the doctors' advised my mother, "Just turn him loose. He's a kid. He'll figure it out on his own." What they didn't consider was that I'd have to start by walking on the outside of my foot, which caused by shoe to wear to one side, preventing me from walking flat-footed even when I was able to do so again. To this day my right shoe wears to the outside, and people occasionally ask, "Why are you limping?" or, "What'd you do to your foot?" After so many years, I've learned to quickly explain it's just an old injury that tends to show up more when I'm fatigued.

Though I never notice when it's happening, I have wondered if this also helps explains why my right knee has issues that have prevented me from running for many years, and the lower pain I've had on the right side of my back since I was a teenager, and the reason I walk so damn slow compared to most people. I often joke that I don't walk, I mosey. Anyone who has ever gone for a hike, or snowshoed, or just walked with me, understands what I mean. Whenever Peggy and I walk, she inevitably ends up several feet ahead, then stops and waits for me to catch up. A few weeks ago, while we were at an airport, I walked on the moving sidewalk and she walked beside it, enabling us to both keep perfect pace with each other, at long last.

Outside of being a little embarrassed and sometimes frustrated when I can't keep up with others, and the minor pain I sometimes have in my back and knee, I've learned to consider it an important part of who I am, a very special wound I share in common with an elite group of mythological figures, and a reflection of how I live; walking a little out of step with most people, moving slowly so I don't miss anything, with a scar that reminds me, no matter the ways in which I've suffered, or have been wounded, or how grotesque and horrifying as life can sometimes be, things are always looking up.

This is the reason I relate to the story of Oedipus, whose name means, "Club Footed." Although I'm one of the few people I know who has great admiration for Sigmund Freud and

maintains much appreciation for his pioneering accomplishments, I disagree with his familiar interpretation of this myth, resulting in his theory of the *Oedipus Complex*. This complex, which became central to his psychosexual theory of the human psyche, and to the notion the human unconscious is libidinous, is supposedly expressed through a child's unconscious sexual desire for the opposite-sex parent, and animosity toward the same-sex parent. I won't go into the many reasons I don't believe in the Oedipus Complex, but do want to explain why I think Freud's interpretation of the myth is unfounded.

It was, "As early as 1909," psychologist Carl Jung once said, "I realized that I could not treat latent psychoses if I did not understand their symbolism. It was then I began to study mythology."[1] It's precisely because I agree that human myths reflect humanity's collective unconscious that I must disagree with Freud's anomalous interpretation of Oedipus. You see, myths share common themes and archetypes across cultures, geography, and time. The story of Oedipus accidently murdering his father and unwittingly marrying his own mother are merely the particular variations on what is a more universal mythological theme, that of a father's fear of his children becoming independent of his control, of losing his power.

This fear may have been reasonable in early human history, when, like other apes, our species lived in small family-sized troops dominated by a powerful, domineering male. This isn't to say all such patriarchs were unloving or uncaring, only that, as they grew old and weakened, a younger male was destined to challenge and usurp their authority, maybe even forcing them to leave, which spelled certain death without the group's protection. Myths expressing this fear are particular typical of Greek Mythology, from which the Oedipus story also belongs.

The Greek god Uranus, for example, is said to have fathered the first group beings, a race of giants called Titans. Afraid they might one day overcome him, immediately upon the birth of his twelve children, Uranus imprisons them in Tartarus, the deepest part of the ocean. He is reflective of a father who crushes his children by preventing them from growing up, making their own decisions, or having their own ideas and values. One of his sons, however, Cronus does emerge from the oppressive weight of his father's authoritarian behavior and, just as Uranus had feared, castrates him, making him impotent. Following in his father's footsteps, Cronus decides to swallow his children as they're born. Swallowing another person symbolizes the ultimate form of sadism, through which one overcomes having to choose between freedom and belonging by completely dominating others, taking their own individual will and identity from them. Before long, one of his kids, Zeus, escapes his father's control, defeats him, and has Cronus cast into Tartarus. Then, following the family tradition, Zeus, after a warning from his impotent grandfather, swallows his wife Metis whole while she's still pregnant, in an attempt to prevent his unborn child from eventually usurping his throne.

[1] Jung, C. G., *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 131.

As unsavory as these myths are, they share a common theme; the patriarchal fear of being rendered powerless by subsequent generations. This, I would argue, is also what the Oedipus myth is really about. Most of us, I presume, are unfamiliar with the story of Oedipus, though we know the name because of the complex Freud famously associated with it. In the myth, Oedipus' father, King Laius, is warned by an oracle that one day he will be killed by his son. So, he has the Prince taken to the mountains, his foot nailed to the ground, and left to be devoured by wild animals. Fortunately, the infant is discovered and rescued by a kindly shepherd who carries him to Corinth where he is adopted by King Polybus, who raises him as his own child, and names him after his wound, Oedipus, the club-footed.

When a young adult, Oedipus learns of the oracle's prediction, that he's destined to kill his father. But because he dearly loves his father, who he believes is King Polybus, he leaves Corinth to prevent it from ever coming true. Along the road he encounters a very rude man on horseback who attempts to strike Oedipus with his staff. Oedipus grabs the staff, accidently causing the man to fall off the horse and die. The man, as you might have guessed, is King Laius, his biological father. Unaware of this, Oedipus continues his journey getting as far away from Corinth as possible to protect his adoptive parents. Moving along, he is confronted by a monster that has been terrifying the region, with the bust of a woman, the the body of lion, and the wings of a bird. If he wishes to survive the encounter, he must correctly answer the beast's riddle, "Name the animal that has four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night." Oedipus thinks on it for a bit, then responds, "Human beings crawl on all fours when they are infants, walk upright on two legs when they mature, and require a third leg, a staff, when they are old." Having correctly answered the mystery of the Sphinx, the creature is vanquished, and Oedipus, unbeknownst to him, wins the right to marry the recently widowed Queen, whom, it turns out, is his own mother. When they realize what's happened, the Queen is so distraught she kills herself, and Oedipus plucks out his own eyes before disappearing from the face of the earth.

I don't know about you, but this doesn't sound much to me like the story of a boy who secretly wishes to kill his father and marry his mother. Rather, like the other common Greek myths I've mentioned, it seems to be about the patriarchal fear of growing old, becoming powerless, and one's inevitable death, which doesn't require an oracle to predict. Indeed, it is King Laius' misuse of his staff—his third leg, according to the riddle of the Sphinx—representing his old age, that leads to his, literal downfall. It is similar with Uranus, who, again, tries to suppress his children beneath the weight of the world, yet is inevitably defeated by Chronos, the god of Time.

That's really what these myths are about, the fear of losing power, and of the inevitable change that must come with subsequent generations. They reflect the paranoia and suspiciousness typical of authoritarian regimes, of their oppressive and cruel policies, and, sadly, of the very same tendencies eventually manifesting in others who rise to power. They also depict the suffering and cruelty young people face, both as children raised by parents

who overpower them by crushing their spirits and controlling their wills; as well as by entire societies that use them as canon-fodder while they are still so young they have been called the, "infantry."

This, I think, is where the Oedipus story is unique, in its emphasis upon his innocent intentions, and that he goes through life permanently injured because of his father's paranoia and cruelty. As a club-footed man, Oedipus merges with another type of common myth, stories involving people whose feet have been pierced or who walk with a limp. Jesus is such a figure, as one whose feet retain the scars of his crucifixion, even after the resurrection. Jacob is another, who, upon wrestling with God, walks with a limp the rest of his life. The name of the Greek god, Hephasestus means, "God of the Crooked Foot," because of an injury some versions say he got while trying to break up a fight between his parents, Zeus and Hera. Scamander is another Greek God, whose name means, "Limping Man," which sounds a bit like how I walk—I Scamander along. Actually, the word, "meander," comes from the name of an especially winding river the Greeks named, *Maiandros*, just as Scamander is derived from the Scamander River. A meanderer or scamanderer is one who moves about in an indirect, slow, awkward manner. And let's not leave out the story of Achilles' heel. Fearing her child might die young, Achille's mother held her infant son by the heal while dipping him into a magical river that would make him invulnerable. Since his heal was never immersed, however, he grew up with a weak foot, which eventually leads to his death after it's struck by a poisonous arrow.

Of all these, I still relate most with the story of Oedipus, because I too grew up with a paranoid, authoritarian father. It was, in fact, his discarded toothpick that pierced my foot. So, I'm a bit of a real-life Oedipus. This isn't so just because I have a scarred foot, lower back pain, and walk slower than most. It's because I know what it is to be nailed to the forest floor, to be crushed beneath the weight of brutality, to have my will swallowed by another person, to feel stuck, like Jesus; to want to stop the violence against my battered mother, like Haphasestus; to wrestle with the problem of god in the midst of suffering, like Jacob; to feel awkward and slow, like Scamander; and to have weaknesses, like Achille's. But none of this truly makes me weak. It's made me stronger. It's made me resilient. It's given me grit.

All of us have suffered and been wounded in life and, I'm guessing, can relate to these myths of clubfooted limpers in our own way. Of course, few of us are so masochistic as to enjoy suffering, but we should come to realize it goes along with living, and the more of it we experience, the more resilient and stronger we should become. This is the whole point of tormenting ourselves with exercise. By breaking our bodies down, we, paradoxically, build them up. By frequently running until we're exhausted, we're grow able to run faster and longer. By exposing ourselves to disease and allergens, we become immune to them.

Still, there are some who wish to avoid pain at all costs. These, ironically, are those who become the oppressors of others, which, nowadays, is increasingly manifested by using

cultural pressures to control freedom of expression, especially when it comes to speech. They justify this by claiming some speech is harmful to others and, therefore, should not be protected. In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff say equating speech to violence is a form of "concept creep," meaning the terms involved, both "speech" and "violence" in this case, have been expanded beyond their normal definitions, which, ironically, justifies using real violence against those who say things deemed harmful. As a Berkeley Op-ed claimed, "physically violent actions, if used to shut down speech that is deemed hateful, are 'not acts of violence,' but, rather, 'acts of self-defense.'"[2]

I wonder if this is partly because we're living in an age of social media in which data drivers are constantly asking us to indicate what we like and dislike—thumbs up, thumbs down. This reinforces the idea that what we, as individuals, like or dislike should matter to everyone, not just ourselves; prohibits the opportunity for a genuine dialogue that can lead to new insights, and, perhaps, a change of mind; and falsely reduces complex subjects to simple, binary truths, like or dislike, resulting in more extremist attitudes in general. Again, as Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff say, "Social media has channeled partisan passion into the creation of a 'callout culture'; anyone can be publicly shamed for saying something well-intentioned that someone else interprets uncharitably. News media platforms and outlets allow citizens to retreat into self-confirmatory bubbles, where their worst fears about the evils of the other side can be confirmed and amplified by extremists and trolls intent on sowing discord and division."[3]

But I mostly think the current inability to tolerate hearing ideas we disagree with, the desire to be warned before hearing something that might set us off, stems from a weakness of character, an inability to suffer anything we'd check "dislike" on if we could. Rather than taking the Oedipus path, which is slow and winding, and sometime difficult, some prefer the easy path of King Laius, up on his high horse from which he use his staff as a weapon—the very thing that's supposed to hold him steady in his old age, representing the wisdom he should have gained by traversing the slow and winding road for a very long time.

Nothing I know makes the point better than an excerpt from a commencement speech Chief Justice John Roberts gave in 2017, when his grandson graduated from middle-school. If, as a liberal, the mention of Robert's very name, a Bush appointee, causes unease, just think about the few but important times his vote landed on our side, like when his swing vote protected Obama's healthcare law, or helped make gay marriage legal. Or just remember people we disagree with are not demons and may have wise and meaningful things to say. "Now the commencement speakers will typically also wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you," Roberts told the elite group of 9th graders at Cardigan Mountain School;

[2] Haidt, Jonathan, and Lukianoff, Greg, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2018, p. 86.
[3] Ibid., p. 5.

> I will not do that, and I'll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved, and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes.

In his bestselling book, *Antifragile*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb distinguishes between three states. First is *fragility*, like a china teacup that breaks, is shattered, and can never be repaired. Second is *resilience*, like a shock absorber, that can withstand trauma without being harmed or stressed at all. But, "Some things benefit from shocks," he says, "they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, disorder, and stressors and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty. Yet, in spite of the ubiquity of the phenomenon, there is no word for the exact opposite of fragile. Let us call it antifragile."[4]

Antifragile, I think, is the ability Roberts is getting at, and what the story of Oedipus and those like it are really about, our ability to experience trauma, shock, disorder, hurt, discomfort, and uncertainty, and still move forward, even stronger and better than we were, even if our negative experiences do show up in the ways we look and move through life, in our scars and awkwardness. The Stoic, Epictetus was born with a bad leg that caused him to limp his entire life. Like all Stoics, he practiced *antifragility* by regularly visualizing what it would be like to lose what he most valued in order to better appreciate all that he had; and actually practiced discomfort by going hungry, being cold, sleeping on a hard floor, and so on, just to know he could live a happy life in difficult times; along with self-denial, not gratifying every desire, to know he could survive a world that didn't always meet his expectations.

But the Oedipus path isn't about intentionally seeking hardship, it's only realizing, as Roberts said, it doesn't matter whether we wish them or not, they're going to happen, and knowing we can not only survive, but can thrive.

[4] Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *Antifragile*, Random House, New York, NY, 2018, p. 3.