

Helplessness

So I want to start today with a bit of a confession, and that is this. I am sick and tired of things in the digital world breaking down and of not being able to get a prompt and proper help in fixing the things that are breaking down. SO, 2 ISSUES: -- SHIT BREAKS DOWN OR DOESN'T WORK AND YOU CAN'T GET PROPER HELP. And the result in each case is feeling helpless. And when shit doesn't work AND I can't get any help fixing it-- that feeling of helplessness gets doubly triply bad..

So, my digital world includes the usual suspects: My computer, phone and ipad of course. But also, I'm including websites that don't work well or are confusing, the speed of my internet connections, the challenges of dealing with spam, security alerts, malware, phishing, compromised credit cards...you all know what I'm walking about. And I'll add to these greatest hits my clumsy 72 year old fingers which can't text anyone without a typo every other word.

The devil is really in the details...Just this morning, my wife asked me if I had heard back from someone I had emailed. I couldn't find the email I sent, much less a response. That was an embarrassing example of my own digital illiteracy, no, my 17 year old niece could have found both in about 3 ½ seconds ... This is called "Digital Literacy"- I guess. And so, I'm too sitting in a class with the slow kids?

As our world becomes more complicated and we rely more and more on technology to get through it, these breakdowns cause more suffering.

So for instance, let's say you're on a customer service call because Comcast Internet connectivity has slowed down or is broken. Now we all know that it's almost impossible to speak with a human being at the other

end of customer service or technical support. I pick Comcast probably because I've had this experience with them and because I was amused by the fact that there's a Facebook Page called, simply, *Comcast Customer Service Sucks*. But let's say there's a rare moment, a blessed moment you think, where you're put into a phone queue to talk to someone, a real person, but you're told, "**due to an unexpected call volume, the waiting time might be longer than usual.**" Now, think about that. It's basically saying to you, the problem you're having, Dr. Bader, at this moment waiting for help that you need is ----other customers, when in fact, it's often a deliberate and intentional move on the part of the company or the entity to save money by not hiring enough customer service or tech support people. The problem, you might say, if you were inclined to swear a lot, which I am, is fucking capitalism and not the fact that there's just too many of us competing for such a precious small resource. And, you know, if / when you do reach a human being and that person shows even the slightest inclination to want to help you with your problem I don't know about you, but I think Oh my God I'll give you my first born child and you guys half my retirement you can't park here you can't do this you can't pay your house on the street... A silly reference to the fact that this is so rare in our lives probably

The problem is which is still systemic—these breakdowns....consider this: while **internet speed has radically increased over the last 10 years, the functionality of websites has not. By functionality I mean the speed with which a website loads and is usable by a visitor to that site. The median "load times" of websites has basically not changed in 10 years and, if you consider only mobile devices, the load times have actually increased. Not only do visitors to such sites feel frustrated and defeated, but such roadblocks cost businesses a lot of money. For example, business researchers have found that delays of**

2 or 3 seconds significantly impact the user's willingness to complete a transaction. In 2016, Google found that 54% of mobile visits ended if a page took longer than 3 seconds to load.

There are so many examples of things like that. Over 40,000 call centers have sprung up in connection to medical practices and institutions-- sense, you know, you can't actually talk to a person directly in your doctor's office very much anymore, a problem that has also resulted in the upsurge over the last 20 years of concierge medical practices which have skyrocketed because at least then you can have some human connection. There are Call centers that have sprung up all over the country connected to medical systems, where you can't talk to someone directly on the phone anymore in an office.

But, see, that gets me to my main point here, which involves highlighting this growing epidemic of A little bit more room here helplessness or, it's synonym, powerlessness. And I'm here to tell you that based on my over 40 years of my clinical practice has taught me that helplessness is one of the-- if not the-- most toxic of human emotions, causing all sorts of damage and suffering. We know, for example, that there are only three ways that the human psyche deals with helplessness--- the 1st is to get depressed and we call that learned helplessness. The second is to get angry-- think road rage here ----and the third is to make someone else feel helpless, something that we call identification with the aggressor and which we see often in cases of child abuse. The suffering is significant but it's also true that these frustrations and moments of breakdown and this inability to get help that I'm talking about are so ordinary and frequent and common and so hardwired into social life that we really tend to feel that this is just the way things are or even the way things are supposed to be and that I'm indulgently bitching about a first-world problem. now I'll admit I hate the

idea of something that causes me pain and suffering referred to as a first world problem. It discredits my distress and doesn't do us a damn bit of good... We can't and shouldn't rank order suffering, should we?

Still -- I'm not unaware of the fact that powerlessness of course is the engine behind most of the grand social movements in history at least in the last several 100 years the labor unions the feminist movement anti colonial movements LGBTQ movements all of which have at their heart an attempt to fight back against powerlessness.

So when I think about it, if you think about helplessness, and around something where you need help. Let's just blend those two things. SOMETHING IS BROKEN----IT'S IMPORTANT....I NEED HELP AND CAN'T GET IT...--THIS IS THE ESSENCE OF HELPLESSNESS.

IN MY VIEW THAT situation, psychologically speaking, harkens back to early childhood, doesn't it?-----When our needs for help and protection and caretaking and support, we can't provide for ourselves. We depend on our families and our parents to give it to us. And today, all the places that we think we need help from are so often indifferent to our needs.

And there was a famous experiment done decades ago by Edward Tronickcalled the Still-Face Experiment. And I think it's relevant here to talking about the psychology of helplessness and the twin problem of being unable to get help and the effect of it. So TRONICK AND HIS COLLEAGUES took a mother and a very young child, a year old, 18 months, and had them in a room, one-way glass, filming them, and asked the mother to play with her child, her baby, in the way she ordinarily does, which, as we know with a young child, is through facial expressions and interactive, a choreography of play in the communication that goes back and forth through eye contact and facial connection. Then he asked her to stop responding, to keep her face suddenly very still, unresponsive, not mean, just flat and still. And what

he saw over and over again was the baby gets agitated and starts to amplify his/her gestures her gestures to reengage the mother, and then gets angry, and then eventually gives up and resigns. THE HUMAN PSYCHE NEEDS CONNECTION AND, MORE THAN THAT, THEY NEED THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HEIR CARETAKER/ENVIRONMENT TO BE RESPONSIVE TO THEIR FESTURES AND NEEDS.

And then the experimenter asks the mother to resume normal play, and the baby comes back to life. And see, I think that experience of a still face and the helplessness you could see in this baby's attempt to get response is what happens in social life at a different level for adults all the time. COMCAST IS A STILL FACE....TECHNICAL SUPPORT FUNCTIONS ARE A STILL FACE. GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACIES ARE STILL FACES.

I think this is something that goes on all the time, and it needs to be called out, I think, and confronted--AND that companies that are really important in our everyday worlds of medicine, retail banking, finance, all of those things need to be forced to provide adequate support and service AND THAT THEY SHOULD BE PENALIZED IF THEY DON'T.

NOW, IN CLOSING HERE, I HAVE HEARD FROM PEOPLE THAT THE ANSWER IS THAT WE SHOULDN'T BECOME SLAVES two hour devices we need to tolerate more what we don't know--and we may have in fact some small degree of freedom **to choose to better tolerate what we can't control, but the causes of this problem are not of our making and don't we have the right to expect to be taken more seriously by institutions that in my view are actually abusing us**