

Unruliness

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When I'm alone late at night on a deserted road, I like to walk on the double yellow lines. One time I decided to stop and lie down, right there in the middle of the road. I kept myself narrow, arms pinned, so cars could pass on either side. But I wasn't invisible, and I alarmed a kind policeman who happened to drive by me. After determining that I was not dead, drunk or high, he concluded I was suicidal. We had a long talk. It didn't help for me to explain that if I had wanted to be run over I would've moved several feet in one direction or the other. And picked a busier road. He wanted to know, why, if I didn't want to be run over, *was I lying in the middle of the road?*

There were so many reasons. I wanted to see the night sky from the perspective of the road; I wanted to be in this secret spot that always got passed by and never occupied; most of all, I just wanted to feel what it was like to lie there, with the double yellow lines running under me from head to heels. But all of those reasons turned into non-reasons when I said them out loud. He didn't know what to make of me, but eventually admitted I didn't sound suicidal. He insisted on taking me home, and he extracted a promise never to do that again.

It has been almost 20 years, but there are still times when I have to remember that promise. I know lying in the road is not a thing one does. But things that are not things one does appeal to me when I am in a certain frame of mind, one that I call *unruly*. All of us are sometimes unruly, but manifestations of it get less obvious over the course of a life. Over time, we stop making tiny effigies out of carved and melted crayons. When someone hands us a bouquet, we don't respond by eating one of the flowers. We've given up collecting the hair we shed in the shower and making balls out of it. The first two were me, the third was not—but when I met the guy who made balls out of his own hair I understood—a year or so earlier, in my first year of college, I had mailed my hair to my 6 year old sister. I'd just cut a lot off, and I thought she might want it for something. She brought it in to school for show and tell, and her teachers called my parents, disturbed. *The older sister sounds like a bad influence.*

Teen movies thematize unruliness, but they also misrepresent it as critique of the arbitrariness or injustice of the status quo. ("This is our time to dance!") Rebellion calls for a sophistication, a savvy, that is a few steps beyond mere unruliness. For example, in my early teens I went through a period of wanting to become a butler. (English language fiction wasn't readily available in Hungary, where I spent my summers, but for some reason one could get all of P.G. Wodehouse. I wanted to be Jeeves when I grew up.) I have another sister, two years young than me, and I remember this as one of the moments in which she absolutely overflowed with frustration at me: "You CANNOT be a butler. There is no such thing as a girl butler!" If I had been a Young Feminist, she might have admired me. But she knew the truth: I was simply deaf to the relevant sense of "cannot." Rebellion is a determinate negation of the social order. Unruliness is its indeterminate negation.

Movies dress up unruliness as rebellion because they are in the dress-up business. And, let's face it, so am I. I've been telling you stories. True stories, but stories nonethe-

less. Even if you were a bit grossed out by the hair-mailing, I predict you took my side against the kindergarten teachers. But keep in mind: you don't know what I left out. For instance, I left out not bothering to dry the hair between cutting and sending, and the fact that my little sister left it in the envelope for weeks before bringing it to school, so that what she presented to the class was...moldy and gross. Which didn't bother her at all. But maybe now you can start to sympathize with the teachers struggling to comfort a distraught kindergartener after insisting on throwing this putrid, rotten pile of human hair into the garbage. Or maybe not, maybe you are still on Team Unruly. I guess, now that I think about it, moldy hair is kind of charming too.

The movies aren't to be blamed. One simply can't help candy-coating unruliness for the consumption of others. We make it sound inspiring—or, if inspiring is unavailable, then funny. The need to candy-coat unruliness may do a fair amount of work explaining why humor is so important to so many of us.

Many adults experience eruptions of unruliness in the form of bouts of weakness of will: we do not do what we are supposed to be doing, even though we recognize that it is pretty important that we do it. Sometimes we feel we cannot do what we nonetheless must do.

Unruliness can also manifest as unsociability. Here's an example from a conference dinner I attended a few months ago. The conference in question had been a long one, this dinner came at the end of it, and this episode from the end of the dinner. I had had my fill of socializing. But I had already gone to the bathroom more than the socially acceptable number of times, so I knew I just had to wait it out until dessert. The conversation for some time had been about pets: sharing stories of pets, discussing what pets to get in the future, etc. My neighbor, a dear friend and mentor, noticed my silence and prompted me to participate: "what about you?"

I said, "I hate nonhuman animals." Silence fell. There were so many polite and also true things I could have said—for instance, "I'm allergic to cats and dogs." That would have gone down just fine. But at the time the only words I could think were the ones I said. Luckily, dessert came shortly thereafter and I escaped.

Unruly people reject the organizing principles not only of our society, but our own lives. We slap away the outstretched hand of the friend who wants to integrate us into the group. Self-segregation into miserable loneliness seems to be pointless, or, equivalently, to treat the refusal to coordinate with others as though it were valuable for its own sake. Equally puzzling is the refusal to coordinate with oneself, for that is what weakness of will is: casting one's best laid plans out the window, slapping away the outstretched hands of one's past and future selves. Rules are nothing other than forms of coordinating, across time (with oneself) or across people (with others). Anything we might do requires at least one of these forms of coordination, and so unruliness is a rejection of productive activity itself. It is defecting from life.

Why do we act like this? What is unruliness for? One possibility is that it is for nothing, simply a form of self-destruction. Let me offer a more optimistic take. Perhaps one function of unruliness is that it offers us a way of holding out. For what? For

the club worth belonging to. For the self worth loving. For the rules worth following. Unruliness says, “Don’t love the one you’re with!”

If we want to leave open the possibility that this interpretation is correct, it is important that we not, at a conceptual level, assimilate the rejection of a given set of rules to the embrace of another, superior, set. For that would conflate unruliness with rebellion. The rebel is a warrior who is trying to get us to adhere to what he grasps as the correct or improved set of rules. If unruliness exists, then it is possible to feel a given set of rules to be false, confining, fake, alienating, in a word, exogenous, without being able to point to an alternative. Rebellion has a destination; unruliness is emigrating without having anywhere to go.

First personally, I’d say unruliness is a mixed bag: it has led me to do things that are self-destructive, insensitive and just plain stupid. It has made me, at times, a bad sister, friend, daughter, mother, wife. A bad citizen, even. But it also led me to Socrates. I see Socrates as the philosopher of unruliness. In some sense, of course, every philosopher is the philosopher of unruliness—philosophers inquire into the real rules as opposed to the ones we just happen to follow. They are bloodhounds for the necessary, the universal, the ineluctably rule-governed. So philosophers study logic, namely the rules governing thought, and they study ethics, the rules governing our interactions with one another. What makes Socrates the philosopher of unruliness is that he was the first and perhaps the last to think those were one and the same set of rules. He pointed us to a single, interpersonal rule-governed activity—a specific kind of conversation.

Socrates suggests that when unruliness has helpfully washed away everything in life that’s a mere accident of culture and custom, everything that’s arbitrary or mutable or conventional, then what’s left is dialectical inquiry. If you and I hunt after the meaning of courage or the nature of knowledge or the ultimate building blocks of reality, and we do so by testing the other’s statements in attempted refutations, then we are living authentically. We are guaranteed to be true to ourselves and our engagement with one another is guaranteed to be a true one.

Socrates went so far as to present inquiry as the only real form of political activity, the only true kind of friendship, or love, or human connection. That might sound extreme, but keep in mind the standard: real Socratic togetherness means no possibility for experiencing oneself as faking it, or merely going through the motions. The allure of Socratic philosophy, to me, is hitting on something that is proof against even my most powerful unruly impulses—it is the discovery of a place where being maximally uncooperative turns into a form of cooperation. And I think I’m not alone: many unquiet souls find their haven in argument; in disagreement; in objecting and being objected to. We revel in the relief from having to sidestep our unruliness, and in the opportunity to perfect it.

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