

Alexander the Great Syndrome



Alexander the Great Syndrome was the name given by an American Professor of Psychiatry, William Wilson, to a condition which he had observed in some of his colleagues. Alexander the Great, you will remember, when told that there were no more worlds to conquer, sat down and wept. The syndrome is caused by success. In the Professor's words, "its major symptom is dissatisfaction. Its sign is the beginning of creative uselessness. Its prognosis is poor. There is no known treatment". It affects successful energetic physicians with neurotic drives, who have achieved their ambition and begin to find that life is no longer enjoyable. They become intolerant and irritable and are prone to "outbursts of sonorous philosophical platitudes" (I plead guilty to this part). There is, seemingly, a glimmer of hope because after a while they join various clubs and pursue athletic activities. Some become academics or, after a few years, administrators of some sort or even master gardeners. It is somewhat similar to the Gold Watch Syndrome of the retirement phase when the physician undergoes separation anxiety from the daily feed he is used to getting from his grateful patients.

Shakespeare had these two late stages of life wrapped up very well in Jaques's speech, which starts with "all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players". For the fifth stage of life we have "the justice in fair round belly, with capon lin'd, with eyes severe, and beard of formal cut" and then we go into the sixth decade with "lean and slipper'd pantaloons, with spectacles on nose and shrunk shank". Unfortunately the end, the last scene of all, is not a pretty sight "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything".

Compare this with Eric H Erickson's stages in Identity and the Life Cycle. At maturity, which comes between 25 years and 65 years, we have Generativity versus Self-adsorption and Stagnation. By Generativity he says he means the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation as well as generating one's own creativity. The other side of the coin is stagnation similar to Alexander's dissatisfaction. We begin to indulge ourselves, he says, as though we were "our one and only child". More excitement awaits us in Erickson's stages because lastly we have to decide on whether to take the pathway of Integrity or Despair and Disgust. It is rather like Woody Allen's view of life when he said "more than at any time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total distinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly".

Reaching integrity, Erickson says, is the acceptance of one's own and only life cycle and the fact that one's life is one's own responsibility. Despair, he says, is "the feeling that the time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life" which shows itself with "disgust, a misanthropy, a chronic contemptuous displeasure with particular institutions and particular people". We all have a few patients like this. In fact, on a bad day, we recognise parts of ourselves in these deliberations although I, as a medical doctor, would like to rule out undiagnosed depression before accepting despair. These are heavy deliberations and perhaps Freud was right when he was asked what made men happy and he replied simply "to love and to work".

This is corroborated by some recent research that shows that with modern medical care many elderly populations state they are happier than in the struggling years that went before. As Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes said "to be seventy years young is sometimes far more cheerful and hopeful than to be forty years old". Alexander, you need weep no more.

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