

Advice From A Failure

By Jo Coudert

You do not need to be loved,
not the cost of yourself.

The single relationship truly central and
crucial to life is the relationship
to the self.

It is rewarding to
find someone whom you like,
but it is essential to like yourself.

It is quickening to recognize that
someone is a good and decent
human being,
but it is indispensable to
view yourself as acceptable.

It is a delight to discover people who are
worthy of respect and admiration
and love,
but it is vital to believe
yourself worthy of these things.

For you cannot live in someone else.

You cannot find yourself in
someone else.

You cannot be given a life by
someone else.

Of all the people you
will know in a lifetime, you are the
only one you will never leave or lose.

To the question of your life,
you are the only answer.

To the problems of your life,
you are the only solution.

I call him X because, when his story starts, X was a victim of total amnesia. He did not remember his name nor his previous life nor how he had gotten where he was. The best guess was that he had been a flyer and there had been an accident. When he came to, he seemed to be in a dark cave, and apparently there were no broken bones because he could move his limbs, but his brain was barely functioning and he soon slipped back into unconsciousness. How long he remained in the cave he had no idea. Weak and helpless, he dozed, moved a little, dozed again. Since he was warm, not hungry, and perfectly comfortable, he made no effort to rouse himself. He was content to let things be as they were.

But paradise is lost as well as gained, and one day he woke to find himself being hauled unceremoniously into the light. Anxiety flooded through him, and he screamed in terror. For the first time since the accident, he feared for his life. It was a primitive, consuming fear that washed through every cell, every capillary. Coming out of darkness, his brain was seared with glare and his eyes blinded. Sounds beat at his ears. Cold penetrated every pore. For all he knew, the natives who had yanked him from his hiding place had yanked him into hell.

Apparently, though, they did not intend to kill him. They covered him and laid him down, and, exhausted, X fell asleep. He slept most of the next days and weeks. He was too weak even to lift his head; all his energy was concentrated inward on the effort to stay alive. Unable to speak and at the mercy of the natives for his every need, he called out when he woke, cried helplessly when no one came. This may not seem very admirable behavior, but put yourself in his shoes: he was feeble and helpless; he was surrounded by strangers whose ways and intentions he did not know; his mind was barely working; his eyes scarcely saw; he knew little beyond that he was alive and totally dependent.

But gradually his panic began to subside and his mind emerged fitfully from its haze. As he gained a little strength, his attention flickered outward for brief moments, and he tried to gather some clues as to where he was and whether the natives were friendly. He noticed that apparently one native in particular had been deputized to LQQk after him and that it was usually she who came when he needed something, although occasionally it was her assistant, a man.....

Since she was gentle enough in handling him and even seemed to be rather fond of him, he began to feel somewhat reassured about his situation. His longing for the serenity and simplicity of the cave did not end, but it grew less intense. His new environment more and more engaged his attention. And he had one success, which encouraged him to believe he might be able to learn to get along. He noticed the woman smiling at him, and he smiled back. This seemed to delight her, and she called other natives to come to see. He obligingly smiled at them, figuring that if this was what they wanted, this was what he would do.

As the time went on, X gained strength, but it was a slow business and he still did little but sleep. In his waking moments, lying on his back and looking at the ceiling, he speculated about what kind of place he had landed in and what sort of people he would encounter when he was able to be up and around. He took it for granted that the woman who cared for him was typical of the natives, so he stored up every clue he could glean from her behavior. He listened to her tone of voice for hints as to whether she was happy or discontent. He noted how she handled him so as to guess whether he must be prepared to deal with a hostile people or a peaceful one. He counted how long it was after he signaled he was hungry before she came with food, so he would know whether, later, he would have to battle for sustenance or would obtain what he needed quite readily. He eavesdropped on the talk around him, although he could not understand the language, to learn whether this was a place where the people quarreled a good deal among themselves, or whether they got along equably and enjoyed each other's company. He watched the woman's expression as she tended to his needs to find out whether they were a puritanical or a natural people.

Knowing that his life depended on whether or not the people would accept him once he was able to move about among them, he was most intensely interested in what the woman thought of him. He evaluated her behavior for clues as to whether he would be liked, whether he would be found personable and

attractive, whether he would elicit sympathy and interest or be ignored. So preoccupied was he with this that he began to find acceptable in himself anything that she found acceptable and to dislike anything about himself that she disliked. Without realizing it, he came to use her as a mirror to reflect back what sort of person he was.

Being so dependent on her, when she went away he wondered desperately if she would ever return. Some of the early anxiety flooded back when he feared she had deserted him. He had so much of her attention that it took a long time for him to realize that she was a person with a life of her own. .

That her life did not center exclusively on his, that they were two different people. He had viewed her at first , just as an extension of himself, the legs that could fetch for him, the arms that could bring things to his mouth. His weakness had made him terribly self-centered, as people who are ill are self-centered.

Being together so much, a closeness grew between X and the woman. They developed a language of their own of signs and sounds. She had always been empathic to his needs, but now he began to understand her better, to know her moods and read her expressions. They laughed quite a bit sometimes, and sometimes they were just quite together. they played small games, and they teased each other. Once, when they were playing, he nipped her to show his increasing strength. He was startled when she pulled back and frowned and spoke sharply. He had not meant to hurt her. He decided it meant that the natives did not like aggressive behavior and that he had best keep any impulses in that direction under wraps.

With the man, whom he was also coming to like and trust as he saw more of him, he could play more roughly, and he enjoyed this because it gave him needed exercise. From them both, he learned how love was expressed in this culture, and he tried to imitate them, for he realized that it was their loving behavior that meant the difference between life and death for him. If he could not make these people who knew him most intimately care about him, he would have to expect little goodwill from the other inhabitants, and so he was alert to any clues and he tried hard to please them.

It was clear by now both that he would survive and that he would be spending a long time among these people, so X set about learning the language. this had both welcome and unwelcome consequences: the increased ease in communicating was satisfying, but he had a sense of loss that the direct, wordless communication between himself and the woman was gone. He was nostalgic for that, as he had been nostalgic for the cave and as he was to be for other warm closeness as he grew more competent and better able to look after himself, but he knew he could not remain helpless and dependent always.

The woman knew it to, and she began to point out his responsibility for keeping himself clean. For the first time since he had been with them, X found that he had the upper hand, that he could choose to comply or not. There was some pleasure in testing out this area of autonomy, and a battle of wills seemed to be in the offing. But the woman made an effort to remain good-humored and relaxed, and X, valuing her affection and approval, decided to do his best to meet her wishes.

It is not surprising that, with X becoming more of a person, one of his first acts as a person was to fall in love with the woman. He asked her to marry him, but she pointed out that, not only did he still need a long period of care before he would be able to be on his own, but that she was already married to the man. He considered the first objection no more of a drawback than does the patient who decides to marry his nurse. As for the second, he settled on a straightforward approach. He told the man he planned to marry the woman and that he would appreciate it if he did not come to the house anymore. The man laughed and went right on returning each evening. Brooding on the problem and wondering if he would have to resort to violent means to get the man out of the way, X considered the possibilities. A most unexpected realization was that the man, being far more powerful and perhaps able to divine his intentions, would strike first and render X impotent to take his place. This threat of castration, although existing entirely in X's mind, so

frightened him that he abandoned any plan to take the man's place. Indeed, he went somewhat to the opposite extreme. On the theory that if you cannot beat them, join them, he set about identifying with the man and attempted to become more like him. This episode ended with their becoming good friends and joint admirers of the woman.

X had been with them for about four years at the time this contretemps, and he learned from it that he had best begin to widen his horizons. Accordingly, he began to venture farther from the woman's side. Initially, of course, he had not been able to walk at all, but as his muscles strengthened, he had tried short steps with the woman's help, and now he was walking fairly well without her aid. He sallied forth to see something of the village, but still stayed close enough to call for help if he needed it. He became acquainted with the natives in the surrounding houses, observed their mores, increased his vocabulary, and acquired some new skills. As far as he could see, he had been right to assume the woman was typical of the other inhabitants, and he confirmed many of the conclusions he had drawn when he had had only her to go on. One of the most pleasing ones was that other people also found him attractive and likable, and this gave him a happy confidence in himself. He made friends easily with the natives. They liked his smile and his sturdiness. They approved of his efforts to learn and to master the world he found himself in.

Each success gave him courage to try a further success, and the man and woman had taught him well enough so that when he failed, he learned from it and went on. It was satisfying to X to be increasingly self-reliant after his long period of helplessness, and because his problems were few, it was a tranquil time. His keepers were proud that he was learning the ropes and they did not try to hold him back. But they were there when he exceeded his strength or his capacities, and thus he had the best of both independence and dependence.

The culture was not the simple one X had expected. He tended at first to make easy generalizations about the people and their life, but eventually he became able to accept complexity and contradiction. He stopped looking solely for answers and became interested in the questions. He realized that it was more useful to draw inferences than conclusions. He became an avid collector of facts.

And so time passed, and X got along very well. If he remembered the early time at all, it was only on the rare occasions when something threatened to go wrong and some of the anxiety came seeping back. Having learned so much in the twelve years he had been there, X began to feel that he had learned everything, and he was startled to discover that the woman and man, who had once seemed to him to be omniscient, really did not know so much after all. It was clear that he had grown beyond them and they had outlived their usefulness to him. He found his strength and his enthusiasm, not in them now, but in his friends. His friends understood him, understood his moodiness, his rapidly changing interests, his concerns, his impatience. He felt guilty that he was turning his back on the man and woman who had saved his life, but he told himself that he had not asked them to bring him into their world.

As tranquil as the previous time had been, this one was stormy. It was not until after it was over and he looked back on it that X knew it had had to be this way. The stirrings within him that had given rise to his rebelliousness were the prompting of knowledge that he must turn outward, must leave this home, must wean himself from this woman and this man if he were ever to find who he really was and where he belonged. It had been a trial time of sailing while still tied to the dock. His old gratitude to the man and the woman came back. He saw that they were wise, and when not wise, they were generous. He saw that they had done their best and that they loved him. He saw that he loved them, and it did not lessen him but enrich him. They had sheltered him for twenty-one years, and now they knew they must let him go. Their job was over. It was up to him now to find his own people.

X never did anything harder in his life than leave them.