

Notes on a crisis and professional life

It is an affront bordering on obscene that the world and its institutions dare continue apace when you are facing a crisis and need time and space to grieve. Of course this is not true; you have many roles in life, and in only a few of them does your sorrow hold sway. What follows is no playbook, but some collected thoughts I have had recently in such a situation.

It is remarkable how quickly after the dust begins to settle that the ongoing world creeps to mind. You have four consecutive clinics next week, the first beginning in 48 hours. Your admin or your colleagues rise to the top of the list of people alerted to your lot. You will be supremely grateful for the flurry of supportive texts and the leaping in to cover those clinics. If you don't have the good fortune of colleagues who will run to the rescue, may this be a moment for introspection in your professional life.

I'm not providing advice on whether the best move is to abandon or attend any clinical work in the week or two after. I chose to work a monster clinic (with deference to my admin for truncating it) on Day 6, out of a sense of obligation, an ache for normalcy and because I needed to get home to get some more clothes. Colleagues, clerks, and nurses were tender. Your mileage may vary. Some may find this appalling; others may think their calling means they should take no break. I'm not sure of the optimal calibration, but I don't think your reason for working should be about calling or the value of the work. It should be about optimizing for your own coping.

Another degree of separation away, your committees and meetings and other open loops will rear their heads as emails and calendar reminders. The spasms of injustice and can't-be-botheredness are short-lived. These folks are just going about their workweeks. They are sympathetic (or would be if they were privy), but are not invested in your personal life, or are sufficiently separate that their needs are agnostic to your well-being.

You could simply not do things, and default on agreements and obligations. As the American psychotherapist Sheldon Kopp put it, "You are free to do whatever you like. You need only face the consequences."¹ I engaged a bit because I was looking at my phone anyway and thought it both polite and self-preserving to attend to some of these memos, meetings, and tasks, trading some pain to avoid disarray in the future.

Aside: it occurred to me that despite consuming productivity, time management, and procrastination literature for years, the fact one never knows when bad tidings will arrive ought to be a potent anti-procrastination and to-do list clarity lever.² The sting of seeing work you should have done last week stare at your grieving self is extra sharp.

That you can punt on a number of things is yet another reminder that you are replaceable. "Institutions are designed to endure," and metering your fidelity to them vis-à-vis your personal life is a lesson worth recalling — and in moments like this, what makes stepping away possible.³ This crisis is the starkest reminder that you will not be able to spend time with loved ones forever.

Trouble comes for us all now and again; none of us has a monopoly on grief. The world continues, and that is no affront. May you have the space you need and systems and teammates to round the edges.

REFERENCES

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