
The Hidden Bargain We Keep Trying to Make With Life

I still notice, more often than I would like to admit, how much suffering I create by measuring my actual life against an imagined one.

The imagined life is not always grand or ridiculous. It is not always a fantasy of fame, wealth, or some impossible escape from ordinary human difficulty. Sometimes it is much quieter than that. It is the subtle feeling that by now I should feel more settled, more secure, more figured out. That my career should feel more established, my inner life more peaceful, my relationships less complicated, my body more reliable, my mind less vulnerable to the old fears.

It is not always the life I have that causes me pain. Often, it is the life *I think I should have by now* that makes the life I actually have feel insufficient.

There are real problems in life. There are losses, illnesses, betrayals, financial pressures, hurting children, vocational uncertainty, and grief. No serious person should be asked to pretend those things are not hard. But there is another kind of suffering added on top of the necessary kind: the suffering that comes from holding reality up against a fantasy and then quietly resenting reality for not measuring up.

This is one of the more subtle forms of emotional immaturity. That phrase can sound harsh, like something we accuse other people of when they are being selfish or reactive, a diagnosis placed on someone else from a safe distance. But I am more interested in the emotional immaturity that lives in me, and in all of us, not as a moral failure but as a part of the psyche that still wants life to work according to childhood terms.

That part does not simply want happiness. It wants a bargain. It wants life to guarantee that if we are good enough, disciplined enough, spiritual enough, successful enough, or self-aware enough, we will eventually be spared certain kinds of pain. It wants to believe there is a formula that, once found, delivers us into permanent contentment. I understand this part of myself. I don't think of it as malicious or even stupid. I think it is young. It is the part of me that still wants to be placed on the nice list.

As a boy, I remember hearing about people going through terrible things and not understanding why. If someone was honest, kind, and good, it seemed obvious to me that bad things should not happen to them. I built an unconscious theory out of that confusion, long before I had language for it: goodness should purchase safety. I have never gotten a satisfying answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people, and at some point I stopped needing one, but the question mattered enormously to me as a child, because the answer, whatever it was, seemed to determine whether I would be safe too.

Santa Claus gave that theory its first concrete shape for me. He was not merely a cheerful holiday figure. He was a moral accountant. He was watching, and he knew whether I had been good or bad, whether I deserved reward or disappointment. If I was kind and obedient, I would be placed on the nice list and the things I wanted would arrive. If I was difficult or selfish, I might be placed on the naughty list and be denied.

I do not say this to criticize Santa Claus. I say it because the image is psychologically revealing. Children build maps of reality out of the stories they are given, long before they have the capacity to examine those stories. We absorb them. We organize our sense of the world around them, learning what goodness means and how reward and punishment work.

For many of us, the Santa story was not the only version of this bargain. Some of us also inherited a primitive image of God that worked the same way. God was watching, keeping books, knowing who was good and who was bad. If your name was in the right book, blessing would come. The world became a place of ledgers and consequences. Be good and receive. Fail and be denied.

When I look at this with my adult mind, it sounds almost insane as a description of reality. Life does not work that way. Good people suffer. Loving people get cancer. Responsible people lose jobs. Honest efforts fail. Kindness does not exempt anyone from grief, and discipline does not protect anyone from aging. I know this. And yet some younger part of me still forgets, still believes that if I could just find the right system, the right routine, the right insight, I could finally cross some invisible line into a life where I feel permanently at peace.

This is where the matter gets subtle. There is nothing wrong with trying to grow, with ambition or discipline or healing or spiritual practice. Much of a meaningful life depends on our willingness to participate consciously in our own development. The problem is not that we want to improve. The problem is that improvement can secretly become another way of trying to bribe life. We can work hard not simply because the work is ours to do, but because we are still trying to earn protection. We can pursue healing not because healing is good, but because we imagine a version of ourselves who will never again hurt. We can pursue success not because we feel called to build something, but because we believe success will finally prove we are safe and legitimate.

This is the hidden bargain. If I become enough, life will stop hurting so much. If I figure out the method, I will not have to feel so uncertain. If I get the right outcome, I will finally be at peace. The fantasy has many disguises, but the emotional structure is often the same. We are still trying to get on the nice list.

This is one reason comparison is so painful. It is rarely a clean look at another person's life. More often it is a fantasy we build using another person as raw material. We see a career marker, a marriage, a body, a certain ease of presentation, and we make up a story: they have figured it out, they are ahead, they are on the inside of life and I am still trying to get in. Comparison depends on distance. We are most vulnerable to comparing ourselves to people we do not really know, because fantasy requires partial information. It needs distance to survive.

This is true not only in comparison with others but with our own imagined life. We compare the life we are actually living, with all its texture and friction, to a life that has never had to survive contact with reality. The imagined life has no dirty kitchen. No difficult phone calls, no aging body, no budget, no lonely afternoon, no unresolved family tension. It is clean because it is imaginary. Then we take that imaginary life and use it to judge the real one. No wonder the real one feels disappointing.

Carl Jung wrote often about the movement toward wholeness, not perfection. The psyche does not become whole by eliminating everything inconvenient, fearful, or ashamed. It becomes more whole by bringing those things into consciousness, by withdrawing projections, by suffering the truth of oneself without immediately fleeing into fantasy. James Hollis, working in that same tradition, has repeatedly emphasized that much of adult life requires examining the stories and inherited messages that once helped us survive but later began to imprison us. A life built unconsciously around old bargains will eventually become too small, and something in us will protest. We may call it depression, anxiety, restlessness, or spiritual dryness. Often it is simply the psyche telling the truth: the old map no longer works.

The child's map was simple. Be good and life will reward you. Find the rule and follow it. Please the powerful figure and stay safe. But adult life does not honor that simplicity. It asks us to live without guarantees, to love people who cannot always meet us perfectly, to work without knowing how it will turn out, to care for bodies that will eventually fail, to parent children we cannot fully protect. It asks us to accept that some doors closed and some wounds remain tender. This is not pessimism. This is reality, and reality, while sobering, is not the enemy.

In fact reality may be kinder than fantasy. Fantasy promises everything and then makes the present feel unbearable by comparison, always saying not yet, not this, not until you become more. Reality says: here, this marriage, this work, this body, these children, this day, this breath. Begin here.

Emotional maturity begins when we stop demanding that life become fantasy before we are willing to accept it. This does not mean we stop wanting things. A mature person still wants a better marriage, more meaningful work, deeper friendships, relief from old patterns. Maturity is not the death of longing. It is a transformation of our relationship to longing. The immature part of us says I cannot be okay unless I get what I want. The maturing part says I can want deeply, work honestly, grieve fully, and still belong to my life as it is. That is not resignation. It is freedom.

This is much harder than it sounds. It is easy to accept life in the abstract. It is much harder to accept one's actual life, not life as a philosophical category but this life, mine, with this history, this temperament, this body, this particular unfinishedness. Most of us do not reject life in general. We reject the particular life we have been assigned to live, and we do it subtly, by postponing joy, by living in constant self-improvement mode, by assuming peace is always one more achievement away, by refusing to bless anything that is not yet ideal.

The tragedy is that many of us have reasonably good lives we cannot fully receive because they are being judged against impossible standards. Not perfect lives, not painless ones, but lives with enough love, enough shelter, enough grace, enough evidence that we are being carried in ways we did not earn. Fantasy makes enough feel like failure.

This is where gratitude becomes important, though I do not mean it as a cheap instruction. Telling someone to just be grateful can be dismissive and cruel when they are in real pain. Gratitude cannot be used to silence grief or shame people out of their honest longings. But gratitude, rightly understood, may be what becomes possible once we stop prosecuting reality for not being our fantasy. It is not pretending everything is good. It is the capacity to see the good that is actually here, which we often cannot see because we are too busy comparing it to the good we imagined. A marriage can be loving and imperfect. A career can be meaningful and uncertain. A body can be aging and still capable of carrying us through the day. A life can contain real disappointments and still be worthy of reverence.

Emotional maturity gives us back the life fantasy stole from us. It allows us to ask better questions. Instead of why is this not the life I imagined, we begin to ask what is this life asking of me. Instead of how do I finally escape discomfort, we ask what kind of person am I being invited to become in its presence. Instead of what is the missing key that will unlock permanent happiness, we ask what truth am I avoiding because I keep searching for a key.

That last question matters, because sometimes the search for a key is itself the avoidance. If I keep believing there is some missing method that will finally fix my life, I do not have to face the truth that no method exempts me from being human. If I keep believing there is a future version of me who will never feel insecure, I do not have to learn how to be kind to the insecure man I am today. Fantasy often protects us from grief. That is why it is so hard to give up.

To relinquish fantasy is not merely to become more realistic. It is to mourn. We have to mourn the life we thought we were going to have, the parents who could not be who we needed, the God we imagined as a cosmic manager of fairness, the belief that being good would keep us safe. No one gives up that contract easily, because if there is no nice list, no guaranteed reward for being good enough, we are left with something far more mysterious. We are left with responsibility without certainty, faith without control, love without guarantees, grief and beauty mixed together.

This is where many people turn back. They would rather keep chasing the next system than accept the ambiguity of life, rather believe they are failing at the game than question whether the game was ever real.

But what if there is no nice list? What if there is no secret place where all the successful, healed, financially secure people are living without fear? What if everyone is carrying something, and the person you envy is also afraid? This does not mean all lives are equally difficult. They are not. Some people carry crushing burdens others never will. But no one escapes the human condition, no one gets a private exemption from uncertainty, aging, grief, and longing.

In this sense emotional maturity is a movement out of exceptionality. The immature part of us keeps thinking my life should not be this hard, I should be past this by now. The mature part begins to say this is human, this is my portion of the human condition, and I must decide how I will relate to it. There is dignity in that shift, and humility too, because much of emotional immaturity is a hidden demand to be exempt: from boredom, from uncertainty, from ordinary limits, from the slow work of becoming. This demand is not wicked. Who does not want relief? But if we do not become conscious of it, it begins to rule us. We become resentful, chronically dissatisfied, unable to receive love because it is not perfect love, unable to rest because there is always another gap to close first.

Many high-functioning people live exactly this way. From the outside they look disciplined, productive, mature. Inside, they are driven by a frightened child still trying to earn the toys, still trying to prove that their name belongs in the book. This is why emotional maturity cannot be measured only by outer functioning. A person can pay bills, raise children, run a company, and still be emotionally organized around fantasy. Another person may have a very ordinary life and possess real maturity because they are living honestly and gratefully within reality.

Emotional maturity is not glamorous. It looks like telling the truth without dramatizing it. It looks like apologizing without collapsing into shame, grieving without turning bitter, wanting more without despising what is. It looks like refusing to make our spouse responsible for the unlived parts of ourselves, refusing to make our children carry our fantasy of significance, refusing to make work or money promise a security only inner development and faith can approach. It looks like coming back, again and again, to the actual: this marriage, and what is being asked of me here. This body, and how I care for it without hating it. This work, this financial life, this inner life, and how I tell the truth about it without contempt.

These questions are not easy, but they return us to agency. Fantasy makes us passive even when we are busy, keeping us waiting for the life that will finally begin once everything changes. Reality gives us something to do now. The great irony is that when we stop demanding a fantasy life, we often become more capable of meaningful change, not less, because effort stops being a referendum on our worth. We can work because the work matters, not because it must save us.

There is a kind of striving that comes from contempt, and a kind that comes from love. Contempt says I must become different so I can finally be acceptable. Love says because this life matters, I will care for it. Contempt says I must get somewhere else. Love says I will begin here, and rest is part of the way. That distinction may be one of the great dividing lines between emotional immaturity and maturity. The immature part of us uses the future to reject the present. The mature part uses the present to participate responsibly in the future.

This does not happen once. I do not think we outgrow fantasy permanently. We have to keep noticing where it has returned in a new form, more mature in marriage and still immature around money, more mature around work and still immature around the body. This is why vigilance matters, not anxious self-surveillance but honest watchfulness: where am I waiting for life to become something else before I allow myself to live it, where am I calling my fantasy hope because I do not want to grieve it.

At some point we have to ask whether the fantasy is helping us live or helping us avoid life. A goal can be good, a dream can be holy, but when a goal becomes the condition for peace, when a longing becomes resentment toward reality, something has gone wrong. The very thing we thought would give life meaning begins to steal meaning from the life we have. Maybe emotional maturity does not mean we stop dreaming. Maybe it means we stop asking dreams to do what only truth can do.

The truth is that life is hard for everyone, though not in the same ways. The truth is that being good does not guarantee ease, that discipline matters but does not control everything, that comparison is usually based on incomplete information. The truth is that many of us already have much of what we once prayed for, but we cannot enjoy it because we have moved the finish line. And the truth, difficult but also merciful, is that there may be no final arrival in this life, only deeper participation.

Because if there is no final arrival, we can stop holding our breath. We can stop treating the current chapter as merely a prelude to the real one, stop imagining that peace belongs only to some future version of ourselves, stop postponing gratitude until every longing has been satisfied. We can begin to inhabit the life that is here. Not perfectly, not once and for all, but more honestly.

There is a humility in saying, this is my life. Not the life I might have had, not the life someone else seems to have, not the life I imagined when I was young. This life, the real one, still unfinished, still mixed, still demanding, still full of grace.

And perhaps this is where maturity begins to soften us. When we stop demanding that life reward us according to our childhood bargain, we become less resentful, less envious, less harsh with ourselves and others. We begin to see that the people around us are not living the fantasy either. They are aging, afraid sometimes, losing things, hoping for things, wondering if they are enough, carrying childhood bargains of their own. To see this clearly is to become more human.

The child in me still wants Santa Claus to come through. He still wants the list to be real, wants goodness to guarantee reward, wants someone powerful to say, you did enough, now nothing bad will happen anymore. I can have compassion for that child. But I cannot let him run my life. I can listen to his fear without obeying his fantasy, and tell him, gently but firmly, that is not how life works. But we are not abandoned. There is still goodness here. There is still work to do, still love to give and receive, still a way to live.

Most of us do not need a harsher life. We already know life can be hard. What we need is less unnecessary suffering, less injury from imagined timelines and imagined people who have supposedly figured out what we have not. A reasonably good life, held up against a fantasy, will often feel like a disappointment. But that same life, received honestly, may reveal itself to be full of gifts. Not complete. Not painless. But real.

And real is where love happens. Real is where gratitude happens, where responsibility happens, where the transcendent is actually encountered. Not in the imagined life. Not in the prize we think we will receive once we finally become good enough.

Here. In this ordinary, unfinished, difficult, beautiful life. The one that is asking us to grow up enough to finally receive it.

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