Chapter 21

The Myth of Discipline

Don't ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive
and go do it,
because what the world needs
is people who come alive.
—Howard Thurman

Discipline is another one of those words, like pleasure, good, and ethics, whose original meaning was once pure and profound, but then was perverted with a moral twist and fashioned into a tool of social control. The value of reclaiming its original meaning is that in the process we reclaim a part of ourselves and become more whole.

The word comes from the Latin *discere*, by way of the Greek *dekhesthai* (to receive), as in a disciple who receives the teachings of a master or studies a discipline like music. In its original sense, discipline implies humility, because a worthy disciple must first empty their cup before she or he can receive instruction with openness and gratitude. Humility, however, should not be mistaken for Original Inadequacy. One can bow deeply without losing self-esteem. In fact, the ability to do so is the mark of a developed person.

Words are a living medium of exchange that take on the values and meanings of those who utter them. By the Middle Ages, discipline had been twisted into a short crop of knotted-leather strands called *la disciplina*

with which Christian monks beat themselves to mortify their flesh and subdue their bodily desires. At an institutional level, a would-be disciple had to first kneel and submit to the authority of the church to receive its orthodoxy (Greek *ortho*, "right" and *doxa*, "opinion"). Those who refused would be disciplined, often cruelly, hence the darkness of the Dark Ages. The notion of the willing disciple had been perverted to serve the needs of the willful disciplinarian.

Discipline, we're told, is essential for self-mastery and success. It makes us stronger, more effective, and a better person. We should pride ourselves for having it, pity those who lack it, and scorn the lazy who neglect it. But discipline is a false concept based on the belief that part of "me" wants to do something while another part doesn't. The good-self must use discipline to make the bad-self do what's "good" for it, creating an internecine struggle of biblical proportions. But *in a war with one's self, there can be no winners.*

And so, when we think about doing something good for ourselves, like exercise, dieting, or homework, we reflexively reach for *la disciplina.* Each January, millions of penitents flock to health clubs, whip in hand, to make good on New Year's resolutions, grunting "no pain, no gain." They torture themselves on geared mechanical racks and hire personal trainers to "kick ass." All the while, just beneath their pained grimaces is a conceit that they can "take it," at which point the tyranny of the disciplinarian has been internalized. But their resolve soon grows thin and so do the crowds. By May, 80 percent have quit. (Commercial gyms expect one out of five sign-ups to become regulars; their business model depends on it.)[1] When we fail in our attempt to whip ourselves into shape, it's easy to feel inadequate. Ironically, we berate ourselves for not having enough discipline when it was the myth of discipline that defeated us.

St. Francis of Assisi referred to his body as Brother Ass. It's true; the sting of *la disciplina* can motivate short-term results, but as any mule skinner worth his salt knows, the carrot works better than the stick. You can only throw yourself against the wall of the Pleasure-Pain Threshold so many times before giving up and saying, "To hell with it." And with