Michel de Montaigne

Essays

Book 1 · Chapter 1

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By Various Ways We Arrive at the Same End

a The most common way to soften the hearts of those we have offended, when we find ourselves at the mercy of their revenge, is to move them to commiseration and pity by submission. However, bravery, steadfastness, and resolve—altogether opposite means—have occasionally been used to achieve the same effect.

a Edward, Prince of Wales, the man who governed our Guyenne for a long time and whose circumstances and fortune showed many remarkable elements of greatness, after he had seized the town of Limoges from its people because they had offended him greatly, would not hear their cries, the cries of their women and children, all destined to slaughter and throwing themselves at his feet, begging for mercy, until, still on his way into town, he came across three French gentlemen who, by themselves and with incredible bravery, were holding his men back. He thought so highly of their character that, feeling his anger subsiding, he decided to spare, first, those three men and, later, all of the people of the city.[1]

a Skanderbeg, Prince of Epirus, went after one of his soldiers to kill him until that soldier, who had humbled himself and begged to try to appease him, decided in the last resort to face him sword in hand. That man's resolve put an end to the rage of his superior, who, seeing him making such an honorable choice, spared him. Those who might understand this story otherwise will not have read about that prince's prodigious strength and courage.

a Emperor Conrad III, after having surrounded Welf, Duke of Bavaria,[2] no matter what humiliating and cowardly offers they made to him, agreed to no more charitable terms of surrender than to let the gentlewomen trapped with the Duke walk out, their honor intact, with whatever they could carry. He watched then, with great delight, these most generous women begin to carry their husbands, their children, and even the Duke on their shoulders. So moved was he by their nobility and courage that he gave up his mortal and bitter hatred for the Duke and began to treat him and his people more humanely.

b I would easily be persuaded either way. But I am so incredibly forgiving and softhearted that I believe I would naturally be swayed more by compassion than by admiration. For the Stoics, pity was irrational: they agreed that the afflicted should be helped but refused to commiserate and empathize with them.

a Yet in these examples we see something more interesting: individuals tempted and tested by both, holding firm against one without giving in and bowing to the other. Some will say that giving in to pity is the product of an easygoing, soft, and weak nature which explains why the weakest among us—women, children, and common folks—are prone to it. Contemptuous of tears and cries, they will say that to yield in awe of a saintly portrait of virtue takes a strong and steady soul with an appreciation and admiration for manly and unflinching energy. And yet astonishment and admiration can have the same effect in less open-minded souls. Take, for instance, the people of Thebes, seeking capital punishment against their generals for having held on to their commission for too long. They barely pardoned Pelopidas who had accepted the charges and defended himself simply by begging and pleading. Yet, after Epaminondas told them of all the wonderful things he had done and, with pride and arrogance, berated them, not only did they no longer feel like casting their vote, they also left the proceedings speaking highly of that man's character.

c Dionysius the Elder, who had seized the city of Reggio after a long and terribly difficult siege, had captured its captain, Phyton, an excellent man who had tirelessly defended his city, and had decided to make of him a tragic example of revenge. He began by telling him that he had had his son, together with his whole family, drowned the day before. To which Phyton simply replied that he was happier than him by a day. Dionysius then had him stripped of his clothes and handed to executioners who dragged him through the city, whipped him savagely, and hurled insults and abuse at him. But Phyton neither lost his courage nor wavered. Instead, he walked with his head held high, proclaiming the honorable and glorious reason of his death: his refusal to surrender his country to a tyrant whom, he warned, the gods would soon punish. Dionysius understood by the look on his soldiers' faces that instead of rallying them against a broken enemy daring to show his contempt for their general and his triumph, this rare show of character was demoralizing his men and threatening to turn them against him and even have them rescue Phyton. He stopped his public torture and sent him away to be drowned into the sea.

a Mankind is such a wonderfully impossible, varied, and fluid subject; one can hardly form a definitive and sweeping opinion of it. Here we have Pompey who pardoned everyone in the city of the Mamertines, though it had given him a lot of trouble, after he took into account the virtue and magnanimity of one citizen, Zenon, who alone took responsibility for the common offense and asked for no other favor than to be the only one punished for it.[3] While Sulla's captive, having shown the same courage in the city of Perugia,[4] earned nothing for it, saving neither himself nor others.

b And going directly against my first examples, there is Alexander, the most daring of men, so gracious to those he defeated. When he took the city of Gaza, after so many great difficulties, he found its commander, Batis, a man of whose valor he had had wonderful proofs during the siege. Batis was alone, abandoned by his people, his armor falling apart; he was covered with blood and injuries but still fighting against several Macedonians who were harassing him from all sides. Alexander, angered by what this victory had cost him — two fresh wounds, among other things — said to him: "You will not get the death you hoped for, Batis! Understand that you will suffer all that a prisoner can be made to suffer." Batis, looking not just determined but defiant and proud, stood his ground in silence. Alexander, seeing his mute stubbornness, asked: "Will he not kneel? Will he not even half groan? Watch me break this silence then! If I can't make him talk, I will at least make him cry." And so, shifting from anger to rage, he ordered that holes be cut in Batis's heels to tie him to the back of a cart and he had him dragged by it, torn and dismembered but alive.

b Was courage so natural and familiar to him that, unable to admire it, he respected it less? c Or was it that he thought it his alone and could not bear to see it so highly displayed by another without becoming mad with jealousy? Or that the natural impetuousness of his anger could not be stopped?

c In truth, had it been possible, it would have been done in Thebes, when the city was taken and destroyed and he showed no mercy to all these brave men, desperate and unable to defend their town. For at least six thousand of them were killed, none of them fleeing or begging for mercy but in fact moving street to street, looking to stop their enemy's advance, baiting them with an honorable death. By all accounts, each one of them used their last breath to find revenge, desperately looking to die taking the life of his opponent with him too. Yet their virtuous sacrifice did not move Alexander whose thirst for vengeance lasted a day or more. Their slaughter went on until the last drop of blood was shed and spared only the unarmed, the old, women, and children, thirty thousand of whom became slaves.

Notes

1 The siege of Limoges by the English army took place in September 1370. The number of people killed and the extent of the destruction of the city are disputed.

2 Montaigne is referring to the siege of Weinsberg, in 1140. Defending the city was Welf VI, the third son of Henry IX, Duke of Bavaria.

3 Plutarch writes about Pompey pardoning the citizens of Himera, allies of the Mamertines in Messana, after hearing from their leader, Sthenis. See Plutarch, Βίοι Παράλληλοι, "Pompey."

4 Palestrina (Praeneste), not Perugia, according to Plutarch.