

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY UNDERSTANDING ONE MAN'S ROTTEN INFLUENCE ON US

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/keeping-your-sanity-by-understanding-one-mans-rotten-influence-on-us/>

Today let's talk about one of my least favorite

historical figures: *Jean Jacques Rousseau* (1712-1778). Pretty much all it will take for him to be one of yours too is this opening line in the Wikipedia entry on him:

"His Discourse on Inequality and The Social Contract are cornerstones in modern political and social thought."

Being against reason, science, civilization, individual liberty, and self-discipline, his thinking has been at the root of much of the psychological, political, and cultural trouble of our time. It has specifically popularized a philosophy of emotions that has done and continues to do great harm.

Rousseau was full of hypocrisy: He had a romantic vision of his native early 18th century Geneva, with its

relatively free peasants and its rural absence of snobby elite airs – even while he was one of only 8% of the elite population who could call themselves a legal citizen.

He disliked the attitudes of the elite in Paris, even while he was sponging off and enjoying the intellectual company of those very people whom he so harshly would criticize. He lectured people on childrearing practices while he personally abandoned his five children to an orphanage.

But he was also a writer who was able to move people with his words. He dressed down where people dressed up, and would speak plainly in circumstances where people did not speak plainly. He was rude in such a way that people felt he was being insightful. He was brutally honest in his self-disclosure, and could be just as brutal in his critique of others.

He was the model for today's vulgar and irresponsible celebrities. His earthiness was refreshing to the glitterati of Paris, even while he longed to get away from them and back to his idealized Geneva.

What inspired people about Rousseau was the implied dose of emotional authenticity that he brought. But that dose contained the virus that inspired the Left during the French Revolution to murder thousands during the Reign of Terror. (The political terms “left” and “right” originated from the two sides of the French National Assembly during the revolution).

While ideals of individual liberty, natural rights, representative democracy, and private property were growing in influence throughout the west, Rousseau argued against them. When Rousseau sent his friend Voltaire a copy of his second *Discourse*, Voltaire began his brilliant reply, “*I have received, Monsieur, your new book against the human race.*”

Rousseau's idea of mankind before civilization – the “noble savage” – was supposedly in harmony with his emotions, and those emotions guided him in idyllic fashion in a state of nature, unencumbered by the constructs of civilization.

Of conscious thought itself he said, “*I venture to declare that a state of reflection is a state contrary to nature, and that a thinking man is a depraved animal.*”

The idea that we would all be better off without the pesky trappings of civilization and qualities like reason, science, individual liberty, and self-discipline, has been a powerful and destructive influence on our culture, continuing over 200 years after Rousseau's birth – as Wikipedia testifies.

In modern psychology, Rousseau's ideas were formative for people like Wilhelm Reich, whose influence ran throughout popular psychology and the human potential movement, and popularized the practice of “releasing” the emotions as part of psychotherapy, in relationships, and in daily life.

Back in the '60s the book *The Intimate Enemy* by George Bach encouraged people to “get their anger out.” Anger was seen as sort of an emotional sludge clogging up the pipes of relationships between people, and creating a kind of energetic stagnation within people. This is Reich's theory relating and applied to anger.

But we know now that the kind of venting or releasing of anger that was so popular back in those days does not decrease the anger. It makes it stronger.

When we vent our anger, *we are practicing venting our anger*, and if we keep practicing it, we will get very good at it – we will have more of that anger, and that anger will take a more and more prominent place in our behavior and in our experience of ourselves.

What's more, when we vent our anger, we are escalating our state of physiological arousal.

Practically speaking, when our heart rate climbs above about 100 beats per minute, and we try to deal with a conflict with somebody, we will not handle it well. We do not have all our wits about us, and we cannot manage our emotions as effectively beyond that point.

We will *feel* very strongly, which can *seem* like conviction and give the *illusion* of justice, but we will not *think* very clearly.

This is because, in this state, we're not expressing emotions so much as we're locked into the fight branch of our sympathetic nervous system. From that state of arousal, it's not possible for us to distinguish changes in facial expressions or vocal tones, and so in effect we're no longer able to see the other person as a human being, we're seeing them as a threat. A thing to defeat or destroy.

Does this mean that we should not get angry? No. Anger serves a necessary function. It is a response to trespass. But if we are feeling angry, it's also essential that we're able to contain our anger – to have it rather than it having us.

It is crucial to understand what we are feeling angry about, and what we want to do about it in a way that's congruent with our deeply and consciously held values – *before* we act on our feelings.

Thus the admonitions, “when angry, count to 10; when very angry, count to 100.” Give yourself time to calm down, to think, and to integrate your feelings before you act. (I have much more to say about this, with references, in my new book, the *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions Workbook*)

Denying our feelings is not the alternative to being ruled by them unthinkingly. Feelings that are unacknowledged or denied can cause big trouble, too. A person who denies or avoids their feelings of anger is vulnerable to intrusive behavior or abuse.

Anger can provide important feedback and crucial information for two people to come to understand each other better. Conflict is often an opportunity for greater intimacy, but not through mindless lashing out.

It comes from feeling deeply *and thinking clearly*. And you just can't think clearly when angry feelings are escalated too high.

Rousseau was absolutely wrong about our primitive nature. Primitive man was orders of magnitude more violent and cruel than today's civilization – harsh as it may seem to us, and cruel as some people can be.

Lawrence Keeley's definitive *War Before Civilization* (picture above) conclusively shows that Rousseau knew nothing about prehistoric violence, that his “noble savage” was a pure invention of his imagination.

Self-discipline, consciousness, reason, individual liberty, and cultural advances have been our strength, not our undoing; and just as the Left during the French Revolution got horrifyingly caught up in the passion and frenzy of their beliefs and ideals, individuals can get pulled out to emotional sea by feelings that are too intense – particularly feelings of anger.

So the next time you get blasted by somebody who feels justified in venting their anger at you, you can thank Jean Jacques Rousseau, that unfortunate man from Geneva... and then tell them go count to 100.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the *workbook* for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D., is the author of The Virtue of Happiness, Mastering Happiness, his new course, Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions, A Master's Course in Happiness, and The Mastering Happiness Podcast. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website, www.drjoelwade.com.

Copyright ©2024 **2 The Point News** unless otherwise noted.