I remember standing in front of my mirror a few years ago; drunk, drugged, and so short on sleep that I was close to going face first into the glass. “Everything is not ok,” I said to myself. “Everything will not get better.”

Judging from the culture I live in, a lot of people seem to think that happiness is the norm. They buy self-help books that gush about the power of positive thinking, and they pop anti-depressants (if they can afford it) with the same kind of hopeful anticipation an alcoholic gets when he pops the tab on a beer can. They seem to insist that it’s a God given right for every last man, woman, and child to be filled with rainbows and sunshine.

Is it our right? Should we worry about it like we do? Listening to my grandparents, and many others who are older than I am, it seems like the concept of happiness wasn’t thought about as much in the past as it is today, especially not by the working class.

“Life is hard, but you just have to deal with it,” my mom would drone.

“Sometimes you just have to eat shit and grin,” my dad would say.

My grandpa was a very serious, (and now that I think about it) depressed man, but he always tried to appear joyful. I can remember a fishing trip that we went on when I was ten. “Keep your pole held up,” he would say. “You can’t tell you got a bite with your pole in the dirt!” he would cheerfully remind me again and again, his smile growing tighter with each repetition. “No, I won’t put the worm on your hook! You have to learn to do that yourself,” tighter still. “Goddammit! Keep your pole held up!”

I came home from that recreational getaway with a black eye and a sprained wrist. For the next month, he would look away if he noticed me favoring my left hand. I got every toy I asked him to buy me that year.
“Everything is not ok. Everything will not get better.” It became a sort of mantra throughout my teenage years. Happiness was the way I felt between crises. It was ephemeral, like the blindness that comes when you pass from a sunlit street into a darkened room.

Yes, it’s great to feel the heat that still radiates off your clothes, and see the red glow etched onto your eyelids, but eventually you have to shake off the sun and get down to business.

When I was 17, my dad had a nervous breakdown. Of course, a clock-puncher like my father would never phrase it like that. “Just going through a little rough patch,” he would undoubtedly think to himself in his own version of my mirror image, self-conversations.

I remember the exact night that I became aware of his problem. I was pulling into his driveway (he split with my mom when I was young, so he didn’t live with us) one night, and I caught a glimpse of his slouched form on a patio bench.

“She’s cheating on me,” he quietly announced, as I took a seat beside him. As the night rolled on, he explained to me that his girlfriend of four years had begun sleeping with a wealthy, and locally known, man of ill-repute named Troy.

“That fat, fucking criminal? I can’t believe it!” I would shout again and again in shocked commiseration.

I never tried to put a happy spin on his predicament. I didn’t tell him that she was a slut (because she wasn’t), or that it wasn’t his fault (Surprise! It was.). Instead, we sat, we drank (even then, it was becoming obvious that I would grow to love the bottle as much as he did), and slowly, as the pile of dead soldiers (our phrase for empty beer cans) grew in the yard, my dad began to confess.

“I never told anyone this...” “...should have taken responsibility...” “...only tried that shit once...”

My dad expelled some of his sickness that night, but I have no idea if it helped. He would speak in starts and stops, beginning one story in the middle of another, and I began to realize that my dad was a lot like me, full of poison. He owned as much shame and self-doubt as I did, maybe even more.

The only difference was that he could usually say, “…always looked like something the kids would put on a rock.”

My life back then wasn’t a casual stroll or assault. Just when I would begin to feel like I was coming under heavy fire and have to retreat... I would get a girlfriend, and we would sit, and would get into a nice, expensive school, and if I won money gambling, I could almost always find greater value either break or get stolen.

My depression made me feel like this was an embodiment of dark, petty gods. When I realized I wanted to tell my doctor to go find Heracles or medeus in a similar situation.

How did my father and grandfather do it? On top of their lives, when no amount of the one... me?

I remember sitting at the breakfast table with my mid-teens. I remember that we were talking and saying, “Sometimes the only thing I want to enjoy life.”

I wanted to tell him that damn near every time that I just showed it more than they did.

Instead, I kept eating.

I went to a private Christian school from kindergarten through twelfth, and from year to year, I never went over 25 students. There was only the same desk all year.

Imagine an eleventh grader hunching over an eight year old at the desk next to him asking, “friendly.” It was a surreal time in my life.
It became a sort of curse. Happiness was the way I felt before the blindness that comes when you become disabled.

Your mood still radiates off your clothes, and see the world differently, but eventually you have to shake off the automatic phrase it like that. “Just going through the motions” or “I’m just going through the motions.”

Of course, a clock­work machine seems to heal and locally known, man of ill­repute.

I became aware of his problem. I was two years old when I was young, so he didn’t know what was going on. I caught a glimpse of his slouched form when he announced, as I took a seat beside him.

I didn’t believe it!” I would shout again and again in his predicament. I didn’t tell him that I thought it was his fault (Surprise! It wasn’t, even then, it was becoming obvious that he was as much as he did), and slowly, as the pile of empty beer cans grew in the yard, my dad’s depression that night, but I have no idea if it was better. Happiness was the way I felt before the blindness that comes when you become disabled.

My depression made me feel like this wasn’t just bad luck, but the punishment of dark, petty gods. When I realized that the Prozac wasn’t working, I wanted to tell my doctor to go find Hercules, because he had helped Prometheus in a similar situation.

How did my father and grandfather do it? How could they seem so sure, so on top of their lives, when no amount of toys, drugs, or alcohol could comfort me?

Instead, I kept eating.

I went to a private Christian school from eighth to twelfth. The school taught kindergarten through twelfth, and from year to year the enrollment numbers never went over 25 students. There was only one room, so we stayed at the same desk all year.

Imagine an eleventh grader hunching over his algebra textbook, while an eight year old at the desk next to him agonizes over the proper spelling of “friendly.” It was a surreal time in my life, and in some ways it was a better time.
A lot of my friends wouldn't understand that sentiment. I humor them by rolling my eyes and making fun of the experience. "The teacher made sure we knew how to survive in the wild after the left-wing secularists start bowing down to the Anti-Christ," I will joke. "I was ok after the de-programming. Hahaha."

The reality, though, is that a decent amount of my experiences there were positive. Mrs. Dunithan, our teacher, was nothing like the Fallwellian bible thumper that you might expect. She was a graduate of Columbia University (the first ivy-leaguer I had ever met), she was wickedly sharp, and she always welcomed a discussion about my criticisms of the religion.

Mrs. D was open minded and sure in her beliefs, highly intelligent and willfully humble, accepting of the world's evils and confident that she was above it. In short, she was everything that I was not.

I never sensed that Mrs. D was hiding a darker self. She genuinely seemed like a person who knew how to get through life without any of the usual crutches. No masks, no booze, no pep-pills. Whether that was a product of nature or nurture, I couldn't say, but the question seems invalid anyway. The important thing is that she became a kind of template for ideal living. She was something to aspire to; even if I thought that our fundamental differences would always stop me from getting there.

Mrs. D, along with my father and grandfather, are just a few of the people I draw from when I think about certain questions. Earlier, I asked if everyone has the right to be happy, and I think I've learned that they do, but it's really another void question. Not everyone has an equal ability to be.

I also asked if we should worry about it like we do. I see that the more we think about it, the more power we give to thoughts of helplessness. On the other hand, if we don't acknowledge it, we often take it out on others. Unfortunately, those others are usually the ones we love.

I've grown up a little in spite of, or because of, confusing semi-answers like those, and I would like to think that I have become something resembling a well-adjusted human being (even if it's not in the way that Mrs. D was, or in the way that my father and grandfather were not).
I understand that sentiment. I humor them by telling them that ‘my experience’ was not the same. ‘The teacher made sure that I was ok after the left-wing secularists start getting there.’ I will joke. ‘I was ok after the de-proclamation’.

A significant amount of my experiences there were shaped by the teacher, was nothing like the Falwellian bible I read. She was a graduate of Columbia University (she was wickedly sharp, and she told me about my criticisms of the religion).

She was in her beliefs, highly intelligent and crass about the world’s evils and confident that she was something that I was not.

I would like to think that happy and confident people look in the mirror every once and a while and say, “Everything is not ok. Everything will not get better.” I would like to think that maturity has changed my mantra’s meaning from that of fated doom, into something more realistic.

To this day, I still think a lot of things are not ok, and probably never will be, but at least I can accept the fact that true happiness will always be a rarity for me. I’ve learned to appreciate the memory of brief sunshine, while I skillfully navigate life’s darkened rooms.

Talia Reed  Window