

The Game You Lose Just by Playing

Brandon Marlon

You're prompted to write of it for the first time, perhaps, at least subconsciously, when a commercial for Bell Media's Let's Talk Day airs on television. Good for them, you think to yourself, publicly addressing mental health issues and combating the stigma on behalf of all those who struggle privately, leading quiet lives of despair.

Naturally, you comfort (read: protect) yourself by telling yourself your own case is "mild", restricted to excessive hand washing and sanitizing. But even the most pronounced neurosis falls short of psychosis; the neurotic remain sane, alas, their self-delusions translucent.

On reflection, you readily identify the tenacious tendrils and tentacles of this condition, the grip of an authoritarian regime. Its specious dictates determine what clothes you wear (quotidian and dispensable, unlike those carefully preserved in the closet); how you get dressed (pant legs on the bed, lest the legs touch the floor); how often you do laundry (when enough articles become "contaminated", though not yet dirty); when you shower, and how you go about it (methodically, best believe); what you touch, and especially what you avoid touching; and the sequence in which you do things (dealing with "pure" things first, then "contaminated", never the reverse).

In the light of hindsight, maybe your own case is not in fact mild but moderate. But this self-diagnosis does not withstand scrutiny: contemplating the litany of your routine, you notice that it hardly seems moderate at all. What's so moderate about functioning on a daily, indeed hourly, basis according to illusive premises? What's moderate about making obeisance before the

altar of inanity seen as such? In a moment of epiphany, you realize that you have been downplaying the severity of your obsessive-compulsive disorder for a very understandable reason—you've become expert at winning the game, to the extent that you hardly realize how immersed in it you remain. But you are honest, and know better. You recognize that, in this instance, winning is losing. You know in your heart of hearts that OCD is the game you lose just by playing.

Ironically, *real* grime or slime or dirt unnerve you not at all. You take out the garbage without hesitation. Bodily secretions and emissions pose no problem. You like getting your hands filthy in garden soil or in the kitchen when baking. It's only imaginary "contamination" that afflicts your otherwise healthy and active psyche, paralyzing you—literally, for what seems like lengthy periods—where you stand as you retrace through your memory the precise history of what you or the physical object in question came into contact with, categorizing the "contamination" according to degrees. If you are compromised, so to speak, which occurs extremely frequently, you cleanse hands or body; if something you privilege has been compromised, responses range from using a (preferably lemon-scented) Lysol anti-bacterial wipe (not that *actual* bacteria or germs or viruses disturb you any more than the average person) to throwing the object out, no matter how valuable it might be to you in terms of personal connection or cost.

Something like a dozen times a day, every day, you ritually purify your hands (sacred sauce of choice: the big boy, PC Hand Sanitizer with Aloe Vera; 970 mL; medicinal ingredient Ethyl Alcohol, 62%; \$10 at a Loblaws near you) not because they are at all dirty, but because this allows you to then touch something you consider "pure" and warranting your own

purification, at least as far as hands go. The fact that, owing to your exertions, your hands appear red and rough and raw disheartens you, though not enough to refrain and go easier on yourself. (When once a cognitive-behavioral therapist required you to throw out a large sanitizer bottle and you did, and she later asked, “And...?”, you replied, “And...you owe me five dollars.” She laughed; you did not laugh, and continue to await long overdue compensation.)

To be perfectly clear, it isn't that a few certain things are “contaminated” and it's just a matter of successfully evading them; oh no, on the contrary, virtually everything is “contaminated” save the precious few things you deem “pure” and take especial care to preserve discretely, squirreled away in most cases in a bag or box inside your bedroom closet. You yourself are normally “impure”, so you feel it necessary to prepare yourself with due diligence (by washing/sanitizing your hands, bathing, etc.) before coming into direct contact with your prized possessions, particularly anything that cannot be easily cleaned because of its material or that is for whatever reason irreplaceable.

As far as you know, the anxiety disorder stems from a chemical imbalance in the brain, specifically involving serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. If their levels are out of whack, to use the technical-scientific term, too high or too low, whatever, then your moods go haywire and strange behaviors ensue as a result, possibly in an attempt to compensate. Maybe when you can't control important things, you try to make up for it by hyper-controlling unimportant things.

From what you understand, a person has to have a genetic predisposition to OCD, perhaps something that runs in the family (quite so, in my case), as well as a particular trigger to set it off. Your own trigger was when you were 12, and the notorious termagant in synagogue

grabbed you by the sweater and shook you against the pointed bulbs of solemn memorial lights protruding from a wall in the upstairs lobby. She didn't hurt you, but shocked you, and the trauma of abrupt assault by an adult (who claimed as she rushed out of the cloakroom that she had heard you mutter something disrespectful, though you denied it then and still don't remember if you or one of your lobby-loitering chums ever said anything) became, in a sensitive boy, a lasting burden.

Oddly enough, when you were 16 you acknowledged the power of forgiveness and unilaterally pardoned the harridan. You decided that four years of hyper-OCD had taken its toll and enough was enough. You quit cold turkey, and it worked. And how did you do it? You asked yourself what was the most "pure" thing you owned (at the time, your new Rollerblades), and what you considered the most "contaminated" (anything that had come into contact with the perpetrator, whether by first or second degrees). Then you forced yourself to touch these things in the "wrong" order, and you rode out the anxiety spike until it dissipated. You did this deliberately again and again and again until the anxiety diminished in intensity and duration and the fictive distinction between "pure" and impure" had collapsed beneath the unbearable heft of truth. Employing what you later learned cognitive-behavioral therapists called "exposure-response therapy", you freed yourself.

Fully 12 years passed during which time you were whole. And you sincerely suspect that *wholeness* is the real value of psychological freedom and the real cost of the OCD regime. Even if you function highly under its tyranny, you only ever have access to what feels like 75 percent of your true mental powers, whether recollection, concentration, cerebration, imagination, introspection. OCD obstructs or redirects your synapses, depriving you of cognitive regions you

could otherwise readily access. You are not fully you. You are not fully in control. Something else is at work behind the scenes, invisible to most, as insidious as parasite to host.

And strident as well. When the OCD recurred all those years later, it returned with a vengeance, as if it resented your blatant apathy to what you touched and avoided, what you allowed to intermingle freely without restriction or repercussion. According to OCD dictates, you're either diligent or negligent. Your laissez-faire life was an affront to its rigorous distinctions and differentiations, which you abjured with abandon.

It begrudged your wholeness.

Others might wonder how you could still suffer from a condition you had once overthrown decisively, a charlatan disorder that ironically made you more orderly than others by several orders of magnitude. (When it comes to cleaning or organizing, OCD is a *^%#\$\$@! superpower so step aside, civilian bystanders!) Having ousted the despot, a mountebank hawking bogus wares, you yourself may well marvel at its resurgence. How was it able to overcome your defenses and whelm you anew? OCD is a clever upstart; it waited patiently on the sidelines then used a bout of depression as its re-entry ticket to usurp your headspace and reclaim the helm. And you've allowed its grip to resume its former tautness, even though you see plainly that this emperor has no clothes, because you dread the intense spike in anxiety that threatens your every move; like some obsequious underling, you acquiesce and appease your commander, doing things entirely unnecessary and utterly irrational (e.g. opening faucet or door handles with your feet, simian-style), simply because it seems easier and doable no matter how patently bizarre or absurd it is, even in your own sober estimation.

Just get it over with, you rationalize, as if rationality is genuinely a factor in such calculus.

Actually, one of the things that makes OCD so potent is that it definitely possesses its own internal logic, which makes perfect sense *within the confines of the game it forces you to play*. OCD's rules are few and clear. You master the rules, you begin to win, and the more you win the more the game self-perpetuates because, sad to say, this may be the only thing you win at any given point in your life (recall the note on depression previously mentioned), or so it may seem. We all crave success in life, and we take it wherever we get it. For the obsessive-compulsive, apparently, fictional success trumps no success at all.

Which point brings me back to the concept of losing-by-playing, and of prolonging your losing streak by prolonging your participation in the game. It is not quite true to protest that you play involuntarily; you intentionally and voluntarily—voluntarily at least to a degree, in the big picture—choose what feels like the lesser of evils. You agree to reorient your entire routine, recalibrate your daily regimen, and even play the gawky fool to escape anxiety's sharp pangs, because in those moments that last surprisingly briefly, minutes at most, sometimes seconds, moments that nonetheless feel like elongated hours of panic and doom, hope is bound and gagged and the imp of the mind, sinister impostor, misleads you into believing all is lost.

But you are fundamentally reasonable and logical (and hopeful), and you know better. Hope may be hostage for a season to depression and anxiety, dastardly duo, but hope is the notional equivalent of breath. It cannot be held in forever.

So from time to time you muster the willpower to fight back against your own semi-pirated mind, resisting or flouting your own pseudo-thoughts, sheepishly making excuses about being too fatigued to succumb to the requisite stringencies. You pretend you're more "pure" than you seem and feel just at the moment, that one thing did not actually touch the other (close call, though! Phew!), that you're dispassionately indifferent to supposed "contamination" (oh dear, did I unthinkingly condone a breach in purity's sacrosanct realm? Damn shame...), that what the hell difference does any of it make anyway, for goodness' sake. You remember the resolve you showed once before and trust that the very same resolve, even if dormant, is yet latent, and may be manifested again even now, decades later.

You would say to other sufferers, if you could, what you regularly remind yourself of:

You're not a helpless victim, your strength abides within;

Overcompensation only postpones redemption;

OCD may have its say, but you alone have final say (and it bloody well knows it);

Ignore the imp of the mind; instead, trust the testimony of your senses;

Neuroplasticity is real, so believe in your ability to organically rewire your brain;

When the anxiety peaks, breathe deeply and calm your mind with the mantra "false alarm";

Above all: Thoughts are not facts...so don't believe everything you think.

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