

授课文本

Why We Enjoy Mishaps

Bertrand Russell

It is a curious fact that nine people out of ten become happier when faced with some small misfortune. On my first visit to America, thirty-five years ago, a train in which I was travelling became stuck in a snowdrift so that we did not arrive in New York until a great many hours after all the food on the train had been eaten up. I was beginning to expect that the passengers would draw lots as to who should be eaten, but, far from that, everybody was in the best of spirits. People who would have hated each other in ordinary circumstances found each other quite agreeable, and everybody reached an obviously exceptional level of happiness.

I have observed the same thing in a really bad London fog. An ordinary fog is a mere nuisance, but a fog so bad that you cannot see your own feet brings consolation even to the most melancholic. People begin to speak to complete strangers — a thing which in London is not much done. They recall the far worse fogs that they remember in their youth; they tell of friends who got lost at Hyde Park Corner and were only found again by accidentally running into a policeman in quite another part of the town.

Everybody laughs, everybody is jolly — until the fog clears, when they again become sober, grave and responsible citizens.

Unfortunately this mood, which is appropriate enough for small mishaps that cannot be prevented, is apt to extend itself to large misfortunes that could have been avoided. I have never been in a shipwreck, an eruption or a serious earthquake, and I am prepared to believe that these experiences are not wholly pleasant. But I do remember the beginning of the Great War, and everybody's mood then was almost exactly what it is in a bad fog — one of hilarious and excited friendliness. In the first days there were very few who were saddened by the prospect of horrors to come. Light-hearted confidence was the order of the day in all the countries concerned.

There are two reasons for this curious excess of happiness in circumstances where the opposite would seem more natural. The first is love of excitement. Most of us go about the

world oppressed by boredom; if an elephant falls into our coal cellar or a tree crashes through our plate-glass windows and smashes our best drawing-room furniture, the incident is, of course, in itself regrettable, but the mere fact that it is unusual redeems it. We have something to tell our neighbours about and may hope to be a centre of interest for the next twenty-four hours. Excitement in itself is agreeable, though of course it would be pleasanter if the excitement had a pleasant source, such as inheriting a fortune from a millionaire uncle.

In the cases of the snowdrift, the fog and the war, there was, however, another element — namely, the fact that everybody was feeling alike. As a rule, each of us is occupied with his own concerns; other people may hinder us, or bore us, or fail altogether to attract our notice. But there are occasions on which a common emotion actuates a whole crowd. When this happens, even if the emotion in itself is not pleasant, the fact that it is shared gives a peculiar happiness not obtainable in any other way.

If we could all be habitually in a state of collective emotion, we should all be always happy, always co-operative and always free from boredom. Perhaps the government psychologists of the future will obtain this result. Public holidays will begin with a huge sky-writing, saying: 'The Martians are attempting to invade you. Every man, woman, and child can do his, her, or its bit.' Toward evening it would be announced that the attack had been repulsed. In this way everybody would be sure of a happy holiday. But these are among the triumphs of science for which the world is not yet ripe.