Human History, Inequality, and the Stampede

On power, solitude, independence, and the quiet art of staying out of the way

There comes a point in life when you begin to see human history a little differently.

You start to notice that the powerful have often had advantages that ordinary people never possessed. Money, influence, reputation, connections, property, institutional relationships, and the ability to endure a long fight.

The law may promise equal rights, but the ability to enforce those rights is another matter entirely.

A person can be right and still be unable to afford justice. They can have suffered serious harm and still decide that pursuing a claim would cost more than they could survive. They can face someone with enough money, influence, or local standing to turn a dispute into a war of attrition.

Sometimes the person with greater leverage doesn't even have to win the argument. They only have to make the process too expensive, exhausting, or risky for the other person to continue.

And leverage isn't always cash.

It can be the landlord who owns half the neighborhood, the business owner who employs local families, the respected community figure whose reputation precedes him, or the person who knows everyone who matters.

The person challenging them may have to risk their money, employment, reputation, relationships, and mental health just to be heard.

Eventually, you begin to understand that having rights and being able to exercise them are two very different things.

The stampede

I have come to see much of human history as a kind of stampede.

People compete for resources, status, security, influence, recognition, and belonging. Sometimes they cooperate beautifully. Sometimes they exploit one another. Sometimes the people who cause the most disruption are also the people most protected by their position.

And ordinary people can find themselves caught in the consequences of conflicts they never wanted to join.

You don't necessarily have to be ambitious to become a target. Sometimes you only have to be near someone else's ambitions, someone else's enemies, or someone else's bad decisions.

There are people who bring danger into your life simply because of who they are connected to.

There are families that become traps, workplaces that become battlegrounds, friendships that become obligations, and communities that protect their most influential members at the expense of everyone else.

The older I get, the more I think that choosing who you associate with is one of life's most consequential decisions.

The price of loneliness

There is another part of this that I think is easily overlooked.

People sometimes enter harmful relationships because they are afraid of being alone.

A young person without family may accept a gang as a substitute family. Someone who feels isolated may tolerate an exploitative partner. Someone who desperately wants acceptance may overlook warning signs in a group, workplace, religious community, or extended family.

The need for companionship is human. But it can make us vulnerable.

Sometimes we tolerate people we should have walked away from because the alternative seems to be loneliness.

This is why learning to be comfortable alone may be one of the most important forms of self-protection.

Not because people are universally bad. Not because companionship is unimportant. But because loneliness is often less damaging than repeatedly placing yourself in the hands of people who do not have your best interests at heart.

Solitude can give you the space to think clearly, recognize patterns, and make decisions without constantly negotiating your judgment against someone else's influence.

Money as protection

I used to think of money primarily as a way to acquire things.

Now I see financial independence differently.

Money can buy time. It can buy distance. It can allow someone to leave an unhealthy relationship, refuse an unreasonable demand, withstand an emergency, or avoid depending on an unreliable person.

It can provide the ability to say no.

And perhaps most importantly, it can reduce the number of situations in which someone else has leverage over you.

You don't need to be wealthy to benefit from this. Sometimes the difference between vulnerability and independence is simply having enough saved to survive a few unexpected months.

A dollar saved is not just a dollar. It is a little more freedom.

But there is a cost to making financial security your primary defense. You can become guarded, overly cautious, and isolated. You can spend so much energy avoiding the stampede that you forget to enjoy being alive.

The goal should not be to become afraid of everyone.

It should be to become less dependent on the wrong people.

The biggest cannons draw the most fire

There is an old military observation that the biggest cannons draw the most fire.

The most visible people attract attention. The influential attract challengers. Those who accumulate power may also accumulate enemies.

There is a temptation to believe that recognition and prominence are always desirable. But history offers plenty of examples of people who pursued power and eventually became consumed by the struggle to maintain it.

Machiavelli, for example, understood the mechanics of political power intimately. Yet he experienced exile, imprisonment, and torture after the political order in Florence changed. He later wrote *The Prince*, hoping in part to regain favor.

Sometimes I wonder whether a quiet blacksmith, living modestly and minding his own business, might have enjoyed a more peaceful life.

Not every person needs to become important.

Not every injustice requires you personally to become a hero.

Not every argument deserves your participation.

There is wisdom in knowing when to walk away.

A different kind of success

If I were to reduce what life has taught me to a practical philosophy, it might look something like this:

- Be reasonably ordinary. You don't need to attract unnecessary attention.
- Become comfortable with solitude. Don't let fear of being alone make decisions for you.
- Build financial independence. Save what you can, avoid unnecessary obligations, and preserve your ability to leave.
- Choose your company carefully. Character matters more than status, charm, education, or reputation.
- Remain ethical. Don't become the kind of person you learned to protect yourself from.
- Maintain at least one faithful friendship. A genuinely trustworthy person is worth more than a crowd of acquaintances.
- Avoid unnecessary conflicts. You don't have to enter every competition or answer every provocation.
- Recognize leverage. Be careful when someone has excessive control over your livelihood, housing, reputation, or emotional well-being.

There is a difference between withdrawing from humanity and choosing your surroundings carefully.

One is fear. The other can be wisdom.

The flashlight tag lesson

When I was about eight years old, I played flashlight tag at a camp.

It was nighttime. I wanted to win, so I hid underneath a cabin.

I heard children running around, getting discovered, and being tagged out. I stayed hidden.

Eventually, it became quiet.

I crawled out from underneath the cabin and discovered that everyone had gone inside for the night.

I thought to myself:

"Well, I guess I won."

Perhaps that little childhood memory says more than I realized at the time.

I had been so focused on not getting caught that I hadn't noticed the game had ended.

There is a lesson in that, too.

Survival is important, but it isn't the whole purpose of living.

The objective isn't to hide under a cabin forever. It is to recognize which games are worth playing, which people are worth trusting, and when the best decision is simply to go inside.

A quiet life is not a small life

Maybe the best life isn't the most impressive one.

Maybe it is a modest life with enough savings to withstand trouble, enough independence to walk away from bad situations, enough judgment to recognize dangerous people, and enough companionship that solitude doesn't become abandonment.

A life with honest work, a peaceful home, a few trustworthy relationships, and very little unnecessary drama.

A life in which you can be compassionate without being easily exploited.

A life in which you don't need to dominate anyone, impress everyone, or prove yourself to people who have no genuine interest in your well-being.

The biggest cannons draw the most fire.

Perhaps there is something to be said for not needing to become a cannon at all.

Stay ethical. Stay independent. Save your money. Choose your company carefully. Keep at least one faithful friend. And don't confuse being noticed with being successful.

- Derek Van Derven
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