

The tyranny of feelings

‘Just do it’, ‘Go with the flow’, ‘If it feels right, do it’ – are there any ideas in our culture that are more evil than these? I don’t think so, but many people will be astonished at my hostility to what are widely accepted to be perfectly sensible pieces of advice. My problem with advising people to ‘go with the flow’ and so on is that someone who follows this kind of advice can soon find themselves in very deep trouble. The problem is that your feelings are like children. If you indulge them too often by acting on the kind of advice I’m warning against here, your feelings get bigger and bigger and harder and harder to bring under control. And soon enough, you find yourself trapped by your feelings, incapable of doing anything unless your feelings permit you to do it. You become incapable of making plans and following them through because everything becomes subject to the passing whims and fancies of your feelings. Eventually, you become literally flattened by them – incapable of even of mustering sufficient will-power to get out of bed. Anyone who doubts whether this is true should reflect on how dictators and celebrities often act like utterly spoiled children – allowed by circumstance to indulge all of their feelings, they become incapable of doing anything else and go back and forth like spoiled children, swayed only by the promptings of their impulses.

This is no way to live – but that’s what following the popular advice above takes you toward. The better way is to spend most of your time doing things that you *don’t* feel like doing. I estimate that 90% of my time is spent doing things I don’t feel like doing. Getting out of bed in the morning, getting ready for work, writing references, marking work (boy, I hate marking work), writing books, dealing with bits of business that have cropped up, going to meetings to discuss college affairs – all of these things I don’t feel like doing. But doing these things that I don’t feel like doing is good for me – it helps keep my feelings under control, and helps me remain someone who gets to *choose* what kind of life I will lead. It will always be a life where I am spending most of my time doing things that I don’t feel like doing, but what kind of life it will be will be my choice, and not *all* of it will be spent doing things I don’t feel like doing. So get used to doing things you don’t feel like doing – welcome the fact that you may have to get up at 7 am to go to a lecture, embrace the prospect of staying up late to get some written work done, appreciate the chance to say ‘No – I have got to get on with things here’ when someone dangles the tempting prospect of a night out clubbing in front of you. Paradoxically, your life will go much better if you spend most of your time doing things that you don’t feel like doing, than it will if you ‘go with flow’ at every opportunity.