



Did You Get What You Deserved in 2015?

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A Prologue to a Naikan-Inspired Essay in the *Huffington Post*

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When I first did Naikan in 2011, a truth was revealed that led me to question the wisdom of the “love-yourself” dogma that reigns uncontested in the consciousness of many North Americans. I know it may seem dangerous to doubt this dogma and reflect on the wrong we have done, as Naikan asks us to do. When I tell others about Naikan’s three questions — What have I received? What have I given back? What troubles and difficulties have I caused? — it is common for some to react with skepticism about the third question because they jump to the conclusion that it will lead to the evil of self loathing.

The idea that “We can’t love others until we love ourselves” is now cliché. The idea itself may not be a problem, but it becomes pernicious when it undermines our ability to see ourselves from the perspective of others. When we equate “loving ourselves” to thinking well of ourselves from a self-centered perspective and to only feeling good about ourselves, we mistakenly assume that we must avoid any ideas, practices, or self-reflections that might require us to reexamine our assured sense that we are good. Consequently, we end up giving priority to the avoidance of bad feelings over the pursuit of self-knowledge. The irony of this is that in our attempts to love ourselves we often consign ourselves to living in the shallows of life where there is little comfort rather than its depths where we can find awe-inspiring love.

During Naikan I came to see how my own emphasis on thinking well of myself and an attachment to my own sense of goodness led to anger, bitterness, and resentment. This discomfiting knowledge first came to me at the end of the fourth day of a seven-day Naikan retreat. At the time I was reflecting on myself in relation to my wife between the ages of 32 and 34. During an interview after this period of reflection I reported how I caused my wife trouble by telling her that she needed to give our daughter healthier food to eat. After the interview was over, I did not feel great. I felt angry; then I started to feel infuriated. I wanted to shout, “I was not the bad person in that situation. She was!” Yet, as the simmer of anger approached a boiling point, I saw something that I have never been able to un-see. I saw how my desire to regard myself as a good person and have others think of me as such led not only to

suffering but also created strong self-defensive emotions that made me less content and less loving in my actions.

The command to “love ourselves” is no doubt a benign attempt to free ourselves from becoming stuck in places of self-hate. But I fear that it frequently results in us just moving from one prison cell to another. It too can foster just another way of self-focused thinking that results in a painful form of cognitive incarceration. To tell people to not be hard on themselves but to love themselves instead shares similarities with telling others to stop slapping themselves and hug themselves instead. This is not terrible advice — a self-hug is not painful the way slapping is. But self-hugs do little to make us feel any more loved and at some point will probably make us feel lonely.

To love and to feel love we need to open ourselves up to others. Naikan is a powerful method that helps us do this. The process of Naikan can be both painful and pleasant, but most of all it is profound. It shows us who we are, how we have failed, and how others have taken care of us. In doing so, it allows many of us to accept our imperfect selves so that we may move beyond self-centered ruminations. The idea that we must love ourselves disappears in Naikan when we see it is no longer necessary because all is well.

My experience of doing Naikan is what inspired the piece below that first appeared in the *Huffington Post*. A close relative who read it shortly after it appeared told me that people who read it will probably think I am a bad driver and parent. This may be true. But the more important truth is that if I do not recognize how I have caused people trouble, I will fail to experience all the goodness and love that has been graciously bestowed upon me by others. This is one of the life-changing lessons I learned from Naikan that the short essay below attempts to convey.

Did You Get What You Deserved in 2015?

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I do not know about you, but I definitely did not get all I deserved in 2015. If I had, things would have been worse. I came to this felicitous realization by reflecting on the year in a different way.

At year's end in the past, I used to conduct an annual self-sabotaging ritual. It consisted of documenting in a diary and ruminating on the Grand Canyon-size gap between what I wanted to accomplish and what I actually did over the previous 12 months. This led to my mind getting sucked into an abyss, where I would perform psychological self-flagellation as penance for my sin of failing to display industrious virtue. I would hoist myself out of that dark place with resolutions to change in the upcoming year. These resolutions inevitably produced disappointment by around February when old habits of procrastination and the allure of frivolities reasserted their command over me.

This holiday season I successfully avoided all masochistic meditations and found that I could acknowledge my shortcomings in a way that led to gratitude rather than self-loathing. This was made possible by reflecting on the year using one simple question: "Despite my failings this past year, what good happened?" This question revealed how even in the absence of any spectacular event, how fortunate I was in 2015.

Below are some of the things I came to feel grateful for and the self-reflections on things I did this past year that led me to a deeper awareness of them:

Good fortune: I too often ate cinnamon rolls for breakfast and gorged on chocolate deserts after dinner. As for exercise, my regime consisted of little more than hastily walking to catch a city bus or running to appointments for

which I was late. Did I deserve to be healthy this past year after doing so little for my health? No, yet I had the good fortune of being so.

Kindness: When my wife expressed concern to me about some neighborhood teenagers who were hanging around near our house yelling and acting wild, I dismissively said, “Don’t worry about it. Just ignore them.” She wanted me to listen to her and acknowledge her concern, but I did neither. Despite the fact that I was inattentive to her desire for empathy, she showed me kindness by making me dinner that evening and listening to me. I did not deserve her kindness that day, especially after neglecting her, yet despite that she was kind to me.

Tolerance: One afternoon I waited at a red light in a left-turn only lane. When the light turned green, I decided I needed to go straight. I cut off a driver coming up from behind me in the right lane who had to slam on his breaks so as not to smash into me. Rather than laying on his horn with one hand and giving me the finger with the other, which I most certainly deserved, he tolerated my carelessness and just let me go in front him.

Forgiveness: One evening when my son who is in middle school did something that annoyed me on the family computer, I snapped at him saying “You idiot!” When I went to say good night to him later, I sat next to him on his bed and apologized for what I said. He looked up at me and responded, “It’s okay Dad,” then patted me on the forearm. His forgiveness was a gift that engulfed me with a sense of love.

The above are only a few examples of how I came to see that failings could sometimes be tied to blessings.

As a child when I complained to my mother about some perceived injustice done to me, she often said, “Life is not always fair.” She was of course correct. Life is often unfair. But what I did not recognize for too long is that frequently I am not a victim of unfairness, but a beneficiary of it.

How was 2015 for you? Did you get all you deserved?

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