

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Resilience: Vital for the survival of this unique child prodigy

No one can predict when a genius will be born, one sees it only in retrospect. Ludwig van Beethoven was one of those.

Born on December 16, 1770, in Bonn, Germany and, alas, under no auspicious star, since the “first Ludwig” died in infancy and the “second” then got his name.

At that time, infant mortality in Europe was sky high; so, it was that out of seven siblings, only he and two younger brothers survived their childhoods. One could cast young Ludwig as robust, even "resilient", since he "defied death" even at that young age. But, as we will see, he lived a “fore-shortened” life.



The “Givens”: Genetics, Environment, Role Models

Fortunately, music was in Ludwig’s genes and in his immediate environment. He came from a long line of musicians who had immigrated from Flemish Brabant. His grandfather, also named Ludwig, was a church choirmaster, his father Johann, a court musician. And the family lived in Bonn in a kind of "musicians' colony". So artistic nourishment was abundant. But TLC (Tender Loving Care) was *not*.

Things got “iffy” when Papa Johann recognized the extraordinary musical talent of his precocious son. “Aha!” he thought, “a new Mozart! A marketable commodity!” Ludwig should be presented to the world as the next child prodigy in the musical footsteps of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from Salzburg, who was only 14 years older. His tyrannical (and alcoholic) father pulled all the stops to make it happen. From the “Fischer Manuscript” about Johann’s lifelong scarring “lessons” to Ludwig, one can read the following:

TRAUMA inflicted by young Ludwig’s own father

“... a child of four, at most five, young Ludwig was forced to play piano and violin for hours on end, even awakened in the middle of the night to “perform” before his father’s drinking cronies. Ludwig was a child who was beaten for disobedience, locked in the basement, and—as we witnessed—standing, crying, on a small footstool in front of the piano.”-

- Cäcilia Fischer, eldest daughter of the Bonn proprietor where Ludwig spent his childhood.

Zeitgeist— “the spirit of the times”. And it was precisely *these* times that were ripe for revolutionaries of all kinds. Beethoven became one of the best known. Towards the end of the 18th century, a new era was already emerging in Europe; one in which everything was being turned upside down. The people demanded sweeping social, political and moral change; the 1789 French Revolution was already on the way!

Thus, the music also changed from the well-behaved classical to the new “romantic” where feelings and emotions were suddenly *writ large*. It was about the manifestation of one's

own personality and feelings via music. A new understanding of nature also saw the world in its original wildness - rough, disordered; in short, **primal**.

It was claimed by his biographer, Denis Matthews, that it was "impossible" to separate Beethoven from his early childhood experiences, his European environment, his Zeitgeist and all the formative events that went with them. How—in the midst of all this personal and social upheaval—was the young Beethoven to find his way? Not easy. He would need a deep-rooted **resilience**.

"What doesn't kill me..." Nietzsche

Well, behind the scenes, can't it sometimes be one's own parents? Ludwig's father, Johann, was a court musician but also an alcoholic; the boy's "best friend" mother was too overwhelmed with constant childbearing (only to bury four of the seven of them) to take care of little Ludwig. This eldest son hardly went to school or met with same-age children; instead, he spent hours at the piano or violin, practicing, eternally *practicing*. No improvisations permitted; just reading the sheet music and playing it straight away.

That his father was a tyrant is not a topic for debate. There is an anecdote describing how, as a nine-year-old, Beethoven was dragged out of bed in the middle of the night by his drunken father and his "bar buddies" in order to parade Ludwig's virtuosity before them until dawn.

The deep wounds were already there: a father who abused him; a mother who couldn't protect him. Even as a child he had to learn to protect himself in some way, while simultaneously trying to remain true to his inner core. A psychiatric study conducted by Richard and Edith Sterba concluded that Beethoven's *"early rebellion against his father ... laid the foundation for his later revolt against ALL kinds of authority."* Precocious—that is, being forced to grow up too early—is rarely a delight. It leaves its scars.

American Jungian analyst, Nancy Swift Furlotti also alludes to Beethoven's childhood trauma and its psychological impact. As she pointed out, *"early trauma frequently results in the individual escaping into an **inner** world of his own making that can be a safe harbor from the perilousness of the **outer** world."* As it was, Beethoven's very harsh beginnings continued to impact his sense of self and personal relationships for his entire life, making him unable to find a loving partnership or look after his young relative (his nephew Karl). Finally, these insecurities also seduced him into alcoholism, erratic-aggressive behavior and increasing isolation as he grew older.

The one redeeming feature: his genius ... and that he could take refuge in his music. Even Mozart said, after they met briefly in 1787 when Ludwig was but 16 years old, *"Mark that young man, he will make a name for himself in the world."* And how he DID.

"...makes me stronger". Nietzsche

Thank God! When Ludwig turned eleven, Christian Gottlob Neefe took over his musical education. He nurtured Ludwig's talents, including his creativity, and helped fine-tune and ground his talent for improvisation. Gradually, Beethoven himself realized that he was more than another "child prodigy"—since he was long since no longer a child.

As for responsibility, he was already a “grown up” by the age of eleven(!), leaving school and working as a professional musician. After his mother died of tuberculosis at the age of 40 (when he was 16) and his father became completely addicted to alcohol, Ludwig—at the age of only 19—became “head of the family” and guardian of his two younger brothers.

But he took on these challenges while, shortly thereafter, moving to Vienna at the age of 21, where he increasingly became world famous and spent virtually the rest of his life.

Of tragedy, deafness and thoughts of suicide...

But Beethoven's life continued to be overshadowed by tragedy. Despite a flourishing career and good earnings, an unprecedented blow of fate crept in—especially for a musician! From the age of 25 he suffered from tinnitus and was horrified to discover that he was becoming increasingly deaf. Deafness, kept secret out of shame, threatened to put an abrupt end to his career as an ingeniously improvising pianist. No wonder that, aged 31 and with no hearing improvement—some say it was his father's ear-boxing that led to this—despite various “cures”, he was in despair.



From rock bottom ...

October 6, 1802. Beethoven wrote his “Heiligenstadt Testament”, a confidential letter to his brothers Karl and Johann, in which he described his consternation over his deteriorating hearing, his social isolation and thoughts of suicide that germinated as a result, and his estate settlement. Here in his own words:

Excerpts from Beethoven's “Heiligenstadt Testament” (1802)

“O you people, who think or declare me hostile, stubborn or misanthropic, how wrong you do me, you do not know the secret cause of what seems so to you, my heart and mind were from childhood devoted to the tender feeling of goodwill to do great deeds myself, I was always inclined to do so, but consider that for six years (i.e. since 1796, when he was only twenty-six) ... a hopeless condition beset me ... aggravated ... deceived ... forced, born with a fiery lively temperament ... I had to isolate myself early, spend my life alone ... oh how hard! I was then pushed back by the redoubled sad experience of my bad hearing, but it was not yet possible for me to say to people: speak louder, shout, because I am DEAF (...).”

- 6

October 1802

The otherwise quick-tempered Beethoven was now deeply depressed and full of self-pity, seemingly broken, devastated, outcast. No escape. What to do? Give up? Suicide? “If *not* suicide, *why not?*!” Viktor Frankl would have asked!

Beethoven's answer, further in the same "Testament":

Heiligenstadt Testament (*excerpt*)

... "What humiliation if someone stood next to me and heard a flute from afar and I heard nothing, or heard someone singing the shepherd and I heard nothing either. Such events brought me close to despair, little was missing, and I would have ended my life - only She, ART, held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave this world until I had produced all that I felt destined to do..."

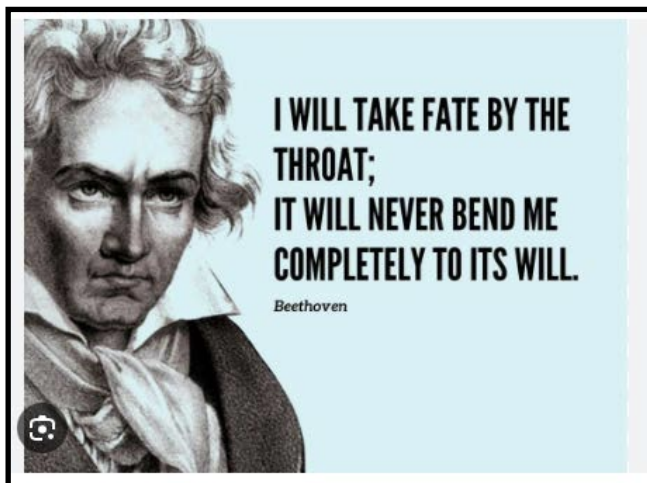
- October 6th and 10th, 1802, Heiligenstadt near Vienna

Although he signed and carefully sealed this letter to his brothers, he never sent it; in fact, the letter was not discovered until 1827 in his estate.

Biographer Denis Matthews suggested that this "testament" could be interpreted as a kind of "death wish"; the "dying" of one life's **phase** (i.e. Beethoven as a brilliant piano virtuoso) because of his progressive deafness ... to make way for a new, more creative phase as a composer.

Psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl might have put it differently: "You can take everything from me, but you can never decide how I react and answer it. Even the hopelessness of an existential fight cannot shadow the meaning of life and the dignity of the person."

Beethoven brought out his inner defiance and just a few days later wrote the following in his letter to a friend, perfectly capturing the "defiance of his human spirit"!



Excerpt of a letter from Beethoven to Franz Gerhard Wegeler, October 18, 1802

From a near-lethal blow of fate to a spiritual pivot. There! —in the short space of eight days between October 10th and October 18th, 1802, in the stillness of the autumnal Heiligenstadt near Vienna—the mystery, the core of his resilience, played itself out.

Beethoven must have somehow managed to detach himself from his dream of a (relatively short and superficial) career as a glitterati pianist in the 19th century Viennese salons and on the world's stages, and "pivoted" towards a lasting future as a unique and unforgettable composer of "music for eternity". A bold venture? He **did** it! But at the price of his own painful inner path.

... to triumphant musical self-transcendence

So, instead of suicide, Beethoven carved out for himself an additional quarter of a century—25 years! —an incredibly productive period. All told in this time, he composed nine symphonies, 32 piano sonatas, five piano concertos, one opera and numerous chamber works, including seminal string quartets.”

“Absolute” music

“Music is a more sublime revelation than all wisdom and philosophy put together.”

- Ludwig van Beethoven

As Viktor Frankl later explained, in coping with adversity, *“What matters is the **attitude** to transform suffering on the human plane into achievement.”* Cultivating such an “attitude with gratitude” is “reserved for (or imposed upon) people confronted with an unchangeable fate to which they can only adapt **heroically**.” (Source: Elisabeth Lukas)

The big “resilience” question....

*Would Beethoven have ever become “the” Beethoven
WITHOUT his difficult childhood,
the socio-political environment of his times,
but especially without his DEAFNESS?*

Most likely NOT, at least not in this monumentally towering musical form!

An ephemeral ‘child prodigy’, YES. A ‘performer’ and magically gifted piano improviser who could play the competition ‘under the table’. YES. But such a superb creator probably ONLY THEN after he had wrestled with his deafness, got to the bottom of his being, accepted this inevitable destiny and, ultimately, transformed it into something overarching.

As a result, Beethoven turned his back on Vienna's seductive "scene" and escaped into silent solitude. Such introversion made him a misanthrope; yet his deep introspection was creative. Only then came the truly ground-breaking symphonies: Eroica (No. 3), Destiny (No. 5) and finally the 9th “Ode to Joy” symphony. After that, and composed shortly before his death, came the final mystical string quartets—Nos. 12-16 and the Major Fugue (1825-26) – that displayed such ultra-modern harmonic daring that they long found no successor (Bartók). He was now living in another world.

Beethoven's romanticism and message to us "mere mortals”

Dr Elisabeth Lukas, Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy successor and herself the author of over 40 books, bequeathed us two Beethovenian insights—and one major oversight—that are relevant to us "mere mortals”:

Refuge from Reality. Let’s start with the oversight. It is widely claimed that Beethoven was a “hopeless romantic” who fell in love many times with unavailable women who then rejected him. Even today the recipient of his “Immortal Belovéd” letter has not been

conclusively identified. In fact, this 1812 letter, like his Heiligenstadt Testament, was written but never sent and found only after his death in 1827 in a secret drawer in his Vienna apartment. The man who had suffered trauma and abuse as a child, did have many secrets, most cloaked in divine musical notes. *Music* was his refuge, his sanctuary. **No Secrets, no Shame.** "*Being ashamed of a loss or disability that you can't do anything about*", Lukas called "misguided". Instead, she advised jumping over our shadows and coming clean with the truth. Such bold openness would not only earn understanding and respect; it could even arouse admiration if we courageously stood by our destiny, converting it into achievement. But, psychologist that she is, she overlooked Beethoven's past.

The Value of Virtue and Art. These two, virtue and art, Lukas said, can stand by us like "Felsen in der Brandung"—boulders against the ocean's surge. Again, she provides prim and proper *formulae*, but quite devoid of warm compassion. Virtue, she writes, equals "sincerity, truthfulness, alignment with oneself and one's conscience." But, speaking of works of art, let's take Beethoven's Fifth—often called "Fate"—symphony as an example.

Beethoven on his Fifth "Fate/Destiny" Symphony

*"The key to these depths was given by its creator himself,
when he ... talked about the underlying idea:*

So fate knocks at the gate."

*– Attributed to Beethoven by his
Secretary Anton Schindler, ca. 1808*

Composed between 1804 and 1808, right on the heels of the 1789-1799 French Revolution, it uses music to relate the universal story of defeat and triumph, of human destiny's eternal struggle, of the path through the night to the light, and of suffering to salvation. Incidentally, in France, this symphony, with its explosive C major finale, is not referred to as the symphony of fate but as a "chant de victoire"—i.e. as a victory anthem or triumphal march. Beethoven himself can also be described as "triumphant" in these, his brilliant productive years.

*"We finite ones, but with infinite spirits,
are born only for suffering and joy, and
one might almost say that the most excellent
actually derive joy from suffering."
- Ludwig van Beethoven*

Self-Transcendence. "Music for Eternity". Beethoven's Ninth Symphony's fourth and final movement was revolutionary in that it incorporated a first-ever chorus that sang part of a poem by Friedrich Schiller written in 1785. Beethoven loved this "Ode to Joy" throughout his life and was already planning to set it to music while he was in Bonn. But it took a good 30 years for him to actually complete it. On May 7, 1824, the "Ninth" was performed for the first time in Vienna. More than six years of work and many changes had gone into the work by that time.



- A deaf Beethoven conducting his Ninth I

This concert, at which time Beethoven was already completely deaf, was also to be his last. History has it that, because of his deafness, Beethoven was several bars off from the actual music by the time the piece concluded. Since he also could not hear the applause, the musical director had to come onstage and turn him around to face his audience as they hailed him with five standing ovations, raising their hats and waving their handkerchiefs in the air.

Meanwhile, this “Ode to Joy” rendition in Beethoven’s Ninth has become the beloved **Hymn of the European Union**, the final German stanza of which goes as follows (with English translation):

***Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!***

Joy, beautiful heavenly spark,
daughter of Elysium,
we enter, drunken with fire,
heavenly ones, your sanctuary!

***Deine Zauber binden wieder
Was die Mode streng geteilt;
Alle Menschen werden Brüder,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.***

Thy magic binds us yet again
What custom sternly severed
all men will become brothers
Where your gentle wings abide.



Taking leave. Beethoven lived for three more years, trying to work on a tenth symphony, but it was not to be. Life’s traumas, loneliness and alcohol had taken a heavy toll on him; he had become increasingly erratic—misanthropic even—often being evicted for not paying his rent or making noise that neighbors did *not* consider music. Even though such a well-known figure in Vienna, at one point, his personal appearance and behavior became so eccentric that he was arrested and detained on suspicion of being a vagrant. He was too consumed by frustration,

illness and finally death. “*Rien ne va plus*”.

Vienna, March 26, 1827. His body afflicted with cirrhosis, pneumonia and edema, his spirit tortured by loneliness and self-isolation, Beethoven died during a raging snowstorm in March 1827. Legend has it that he briefly awakened from his coma, supposedly just long enough to raise his clenched fist against God, before passing from this world. One last gesture of a genius, defiant to the end!

And so Beethoven's life ended, actually far too early at the age of only 56 and with his Tenth symphony still "unfinished". And yet he had the valor to say:

*"I close my eyes in the blessed certainty
that I have left a ray of light on the earth."
- Ludwig van Beethoven*

Ludwig van Beethoven. Readers 'Interactive Workbook

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with these historic or contemporary profiles can inspire your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived with bruisingly useful “lessons learned”. This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Dare to explore Beethoven’s “spiritual defiance”.*

1. Beethoven had a very rough, tough childhood, featuring an alcoholic father who beat him and a mother who may have cared for him but was unable to protect him. Nor did he even go to school; his whole life was playing the piano in order to become the next Mozart. **In your own early years, were you surrounded with love, security, stability and happiness? Or could you in any way identify with Beethoven’s young years? Do YOU have a creative outlet for your talents? How might these factors have affected you as an adult? Did you develop resilience? And *maintain* it? Why ... or why *not*?**

2. Many superficial, short-lived romances but no long-term, nurturing female relationships. Never married, no children (that we know of). By all accounts, Beethoven was not only aggressive and inscrutable but also hard to get along with. **How does it look in *your* life? Are you a loner or happily married with family? Do you feel “in sync” with life’s softer aspects or, rather, sorely misunderstood and unappreciated? How might you explain this in terms of your own childhood. How does that affect you today?**

3. Speaking of ego, one of Beethoven’s most infamous tirades was made in 1806 to his patron and benefactor, Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, in which the composer declared, *“Prince, what you are, you are by accident of birth; what I am, I am through **myself**. There have been, and still will be, thousands of princes; there is only one Beethoven.”* **How does this go over with you? Was he right? How heavy a price did he pay? Do YOU in any area of your life pay such a heavy price for feeling yourself superior?**

4. Resilience. Beethoven appeared to have made that inner spiritual pivot in 1802 in just eight days: from deciding to take his own life (due to his encroaching deafness) to turning furiously on “the Fates” that had so punished him. But, in his later years, his resilience ebbed and he died in most painful isolation. **You may still be young—on the cusp of a bright future—or already in life’s twilight years. How do you see yourself? Have you “weathered life’s storms” adequately in your *own* eyes? What has been most of help to you? If not, what lessons might Beethoven have to share with you? Be HONEST with yourself (no one need see your answers.)**
