

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was a pianist, organist, composer, and musical genius of the highest order—usually ranked only with Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Born in Bonn, Germany, the son of a tenor, he was groomed to be a musician from an early age. Leaving school at eleven, he began as assistant organist in the court of Bonn, and was taught by both Mozart and Haydn before moving permanently to Vienna where he wrote and published his most famous works.

WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

In 1802 Beethoven began to suffer seriously from depression brought about by realization that his growing deafness, first noticed in 1796, would be incurable. Deafness did not affect his ability to compose, but it curtailed his ability to perform, conduct, and teach. More and more tormented by this deafness, he became increasingly irascible. In 1812 Goethe described him as “an utterly untamed personality.” But friends wrote more sympathetically that “despite all these absurdities, there was something so touching and ennobling about him that one could not help admiring him and feeling drawn to him.”

In his despair, Beethoven wrote a will-like document to his two brothers that has become known as the Heiligenstadt Testament. He confesses his misery and feels close to death. He recovered, however, and his creative middle period is often called his “heroic period” because of his determination to strive creatively in the face of despair—in his own words, “seizing fate by the throat.”

The following reading is taken from a manuscript in Beethoven’s own writing that was discovered after his death and later owned by such people as Franz Liszt and Jenny Lind. The manuscript is currently in the Library of Hamburg. It illustrates how many great leaders and creators have achieved their noblest work in the face of great handicaps—among others, John Milton overcoming blindness, Leo Tolstoy suicidal meaninglessness, Fyodor Dostoevsky epilepsy, Blaise Pascal and Simone Weil excruciating pain, and Winston Churchill the “black dog” of depression.

Limping but Alive

“That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

“So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’

“But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’

“The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’

“‘Jacob,’ he answered.

“Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.’

“Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there.

“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’

"The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon."

Genesis 32:22-32

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The Heiligenstadt Testament

HEILIGENSTADT, October 6, 1802

For my brothers Carl and ———— Beethoven

O my fellow men, who consider me, or describe me as, unfriendly, peevish, or even misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me. For you do not know the secret reason why I appear to you to be so. Ever since my childhood my heart and soul have been imbued with the tender feeling of goodwill; and I have always been ready to perform even great actions. But just think, for the last six years I have been afflicted with an incurable complaint which has been made worse by incompetent doctors. From year to year my hopes of being cured have gradually been shattered and finally I have been forced to accept the prospect of a *permanent infirmity* (the curing of which may perhaps take years or may even prove to be impossible).

Though endowed with a passionate and lively temperament and even fond of the distractions offered by society I was soon obliged to seclude myself and live in solitude. If at times I decided just to ignore my infirmity, alas! how cruelly was I then driven back by the intensified sad experience of my poor hearing. Yet I could not bring myself to say to people: "Speak up, shout, for I am deaf." Alas! how could I possibly refer to the impairing of a sense which in me should be more perfectly developed than in other people, a sense which at one time I possessed in the greatest perfection, even to a degree of perfection such as assuredly few in my profession possess or have ever possessed—Oh, I cannot do it; so forgive me, if you ever see me withdrawing from your company which I used to enjoy.

Moreover my misfortune pains me doubly, inasmuch as it leads to my being misjudged. For me there can be no relaxation in human society, no refined conversations, no mutual confidence. I must live quite alone and may creep into society only as often as sheer necessity demands; I must live like an outcast. If I appear in company I am overcome by a burning anxiety, a fear that I am running the risk of letting people notice my condition—And that has been my experience during the last six months which I have spent in the country. My sensible doctor by suggesting that I should spare my hearing as much as possible has more or less encouraged my present natural inclination, though indeed when carried away now and then by my instinctive desire for human society, I have let myself be tempted to seek it. But how humiliated I have felt if somebody standing beside me heard the sound of a flute in the distance and I *heard nothing*, or if somebody heard a *shepherd sing* and again I heard nothing—

O my fellow men, who consider me, or describe me as, unfriendly, peevish, or even misanthropic, how greatly do you wrong me.

Yet I could not bring myself to say to people: "Speak up, shout, for I am deaf." Alas! how could I possibly refer to the impairing of a sense which in me should be more perfectly developed than in other people, a sense which at one time I possessed in the greatest perfection.

Such experiences almost made me despair, and I was on the point of putting an end to my life—The only thing that held me back was *my art*. For indeed it seemed to me impossible to leave this world before I had produced all the works that I felt the urge to compose; and thus I have dragged on this miserable existence—a truly miserable existence, seeing that I have such a sensitive body that any fairly sudden change can plunge me from the best spirits into the worst of humours—*Patience*—that is the virtue, I am told, which I must now choose for my guide; and I now possess it—I hope that I shall persist in my resolve to endure to the end, until it pleases the inexorable Parcae to cut the thread; perhaps my condition will improve, perhaps not; at any rate I am now resigned—At the early age of 28 I was obliged to become a philosopher, though this was not easy; for indeed this is more difficult for an artist than for anyone else—Almighty God, who look down into my innermost soul, you see into my heart and you know that it is filled with love for humanity and a desire to do good. Oh my fellow men, when someday you read this statement, remember that you have done me wrong; and let some unfortunate man derive comfort from the thought that he has found another equally unfortunate who, notwithstanding all the obstacles imposed by nature, yet did everything in his power to be raised to the rank of noble artists and human beings.—

And you, my brothers Carl and [Johann], when I am dead, request on my behalf Professor Schmidt, if he is still living, to describe my disease, and attach this written document to his record, so that after my death at any rate the world and I may be reconciled as far as possible—At the same time I herewith nominate you both heirs to my small property (if I may so describe it)—Divide it honestly, live in harmony, and help one another. You know that you have long ago been forgiven for the harm you did me. I again thank you, my brother Carl, in particular, for the affection you have shown me of late years. My wish is that you should have a better and more carefree existence than I have had. Urge your children to be *virtuous*, for virtue alone can make a man happy. Money cannot do this. I speak from experience. It was virtue that sustained me in my misery. It was thanks to virtue and also to my art that I did not put an end to my life by suicide—Farewell and love one another—I thank all my friends, and especially *Prince Lichnowsky* and *Professor Schmidt*. I would like *Prince L[ichnowsky]*'s instruments to be preserved by one of you, provided this does not lead to a quarrel between you. But as soon as they can serve a more useful purpose, just sell them; and how glad I shall be if in my grave I can still be of some use to you both—

Well, that is all—Joyfully I go to meet Death—should it come before I have had an opportunity of developing all my artistic gifts, then in spite of my hard fate it would still come too soon, and no doubt I should like it to postpone its coming—Yet even so I should be content, for would it not free me from a condition of continual suffering? Come then, Death, *whenever* you like, and with courage I will go to meet you—Farewell; and when I am dead, do not wholly forget me. I deserve to be remembered by you, since during my lifetime I have often thought of you and tried to make you happy—Be happy—

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Such experiences almost made me despair, and I was on the point of putting an end to my life—The only thing that held me back was my art. For indeed it seemed to me impossible to leave this world before I had produced all the works that I felt the urge to compose; and thus I have dragged on this miserable existence.

Let some unfortunate man derive comfort from the thought that he has found another equally unfortunate who, notwithstanding all the obstacles imposed by nature, yet did everything in his power to be raised to the rank of noble artists and human beings.

Well, that is all—Joyfully I go to meet Death—should it come before I have had an opportunity of developing all my artistic gifts, then in spite of my hard fate it would still come too soon, and no doubt I should like it to postpone its coming.

As the autumn leaves fall and wither, likewise—that hope has faded for me.

For my brothers Carl and ———
To be read and executed after my death—

HEILIGENSTADT, October 10, 1802—Thus I take leave of you—and, what is more, rather sadly—yes, the hope I cherished—the hope I brought with me here of being cured to a certain extent at any rate—that hope I must now abandon completely. As the autumn leaves fall and wither, likewise—that hope has faded for me. I am leaving here—almost in the same condition as I arrived—Even that high courage—which has often inspired me on fine summer days—has vanished—Oh Providence—do but grant me one day of pure joy—For so long now the inner echo of real joy has been unknown to me—Oh when—oh when, Almighty God—shall I be able to hear and feel this echo again in the temple of Nature and in contact with humanity—Never?—No!—Oh, that would be too hard.

These documents, translated from the German by Emily Anderson, are reprinted from George R. Marek, *Beethoven: Biography of a Genius*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls pp. 325–327. © 1969 Harper Collins Publishers.

Paying the Price?

“Such are the happy effects of adversity; it teaches princes moderation, and makes them feel the pains of others. When they have never drunk but from the sweet poisoned cup of prosperity, they look upon themselves as gods; they would have the mountains humble themselves into plains to please them; they count men as nothing; they expect that all nature should be subservient to their will. When mention is made of suffering, they know not what it mean: they have no idea of it, having never known the difference between happiness and misery. It is misfortune alone that can teach them humanity, and soften their obdurate hearts: then they find they are only men, and that they ought to study the ease and happiness of other men, who are like them.”

Mentor to young Telemachus, son of Ulysses
in François Fénelon’s *Telemachus*

“The curse of God is upon me.”

the reformer Lord Shaftesbury,
at the low point of a black depression, 1827

“In any large undertaking, there are rough times to go through, & of course success may not come till after one is dead—but those things don’t matter if one is in earnest.”

Bertrand Russell, letter to a friend, 1916

“I always feel as if I stood naked for the fire of Almighty God to go through me—and it’s rather an awful feeling. One has to be terribly religious, to be an artist.”

D. H. Lawrence

“What made the success of my books is what makes them lies to me. In fact I am an average man + demands.”

Albert Camus, *Notebooks*

“It would be better that the door of my prison had never been opened than if it now bangs in my face! How hard to submit to God’s will.”

C. S. Lewis, after giving up a much-needed vacation in Ireland
with a childhood friend because of his brother’s alcoholism

"Of recorded dramas of the soul, that of Tolstoy's relations to God is among the most absorbing and majestic. In contemplating it one is haunted by the notion that the forces engaged on either side were not infinitely disparate in magnitude. This is a notion which a number of great artists bring to mind. I have heard students of music infer a similar confrontation from the late compositions of Beethoven, and there are pieces of statuary by Michelangelo which hint at awesome encounters between God and the more god-like of His creatures. To have carved the figures in the Medici Chapel, to have imagined Hamlet and Falstaff, to have heard the *Missa Solemnis* out of deafness is to have said, in some mortal but irreducible manner, 'Let there be light.' It is to have wrestled with the angel. Something of the artist is consumed or mutilated in the combat. Art itself has its emblem in the image of Jacob limping away from the Jabbok, blest, wounded, and transformed by his dread match. This, perhaps, is why one fancies that there was in Milton's blindness, in Beethoven's deafness, or in Tolstoy's final, hunted pilgrimage towards death some terrible but appropriate justice. How much mastery over creation can a man achieve and yet remain unscathed?"

George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. How would you gauge Beethoven's overall response to this terrible affliction? What is the tone of his letter to his brothers? At this point, how long has he been suffering from the loss of his hearing?
2. What must it have been like for a musical genius to lose the one sense that mattered?
3. Several times he addresses "my fellow men" as well as "Almighty God." How do you understand this appeal? Is he merely talking to his brothers? What do you think his purpose was in writing the letter?
4. What is Beethoven's explanation for withdrawing from society? How do you think the withdrawal affected him? How does he describe his life? Do you think the isolation bothered him as much as "being misjudged"? He says, "If I appear in company I am overcome by a burning anxiety" that people will find out he is deaf. Why did he not tell people of his malady?
5. What keeps him from "putting an end to [his] life"? What is left to accomplish? How is he able to keep on going?
6. With statements such as "remember that you have done me wrong" and "that . . . the world and I may be reconciled as far as possible," what is he saying? What do you think he wants?
7. In the second, short letter to his brothers, Beethoven pleads with God: "oh Providence—do but grant me one day of pure joy . . . Oh when . . . shall I be able to hear and feel this echo again. . . ?" How do you understand this passage? What does it say of Beethoven's love for his art?
8. Read George Steiner's words in the box, "Paying the price?" What do you think of his explanation of Beethoven's deafness? How would a biblical explanation differ?