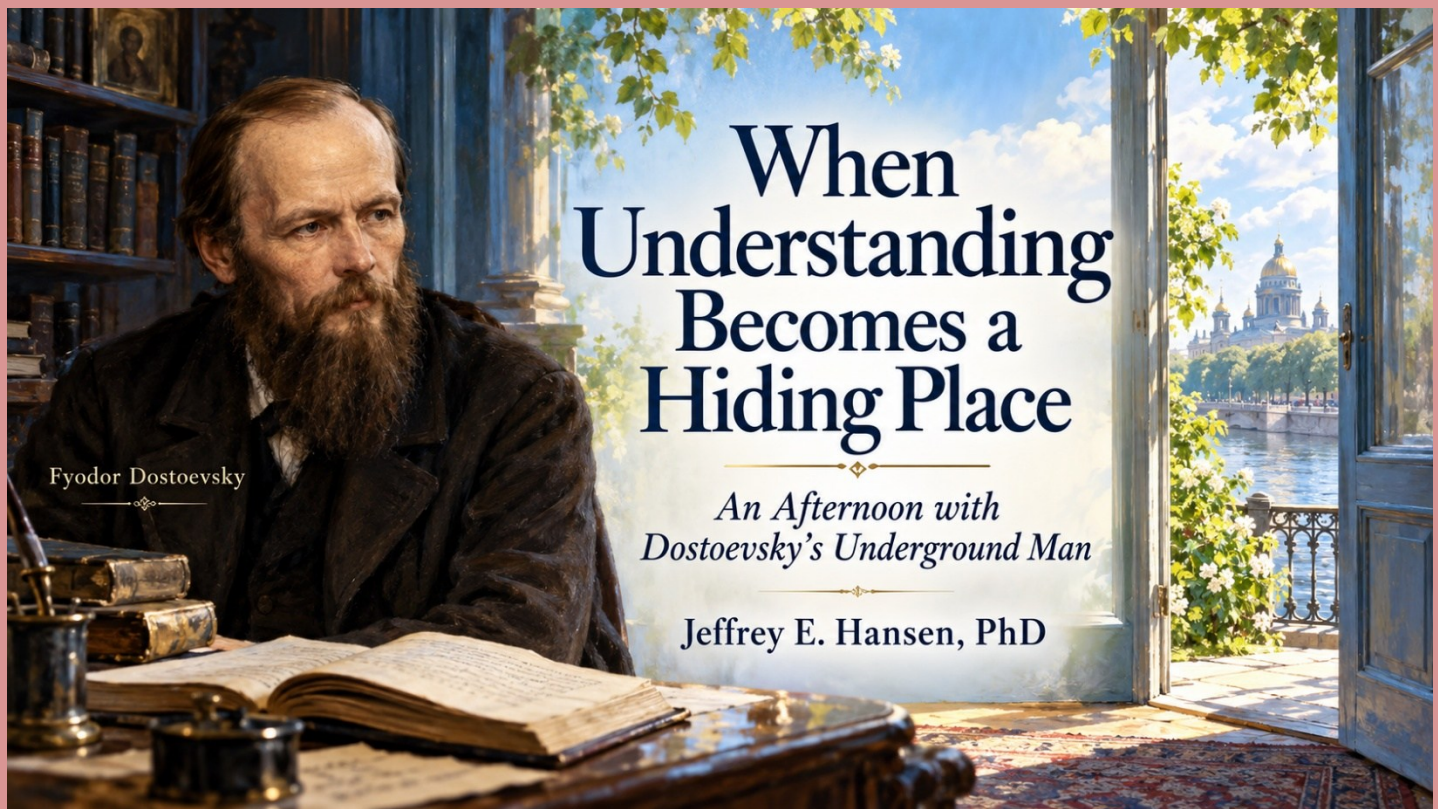




Sunday With Dostoevsky

This Sunday afternoon, I sat reading Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Or, more honestly, reading as much of it as I could take. Remarkable book. Remarkable psychological insight. And, at times, an absolutely miserable reading experience.

The Underground Man examines everything. His grievances. His humiliations. His motives. His motives for questioning his motives. Just when you think he has finally made his point, he circles back, challenges himself, anticipates your objection, and begins again. Meanwhile, I am looking at these dense stretches of text, wondering whether a paragraph break might be too much to ask.

Good grief, man. Take a breath.

Then something struck me. The pain of the analysis was becoming the pain of having to read the analysis. I felt trapped inside a mind that would not give itself a moment's peace. He could give himself no room to breathe. Spending time with him, I could scarcely breathe either.

And I began to wonder how often we do some version of this to ourselves.

A Brilliant Explanation for Staying Stuck

Dostoevsky's Underground Man is intelligent, wounded, proud, and desperately lonely. He wants recognition and dignity. Somewhere beneath all that hostility, he wants to be loved. But he has a remarkable ability to destroy the things he wants.

He looks down on people whose approval he desperately seeks. He resents being overlooked, then behaves in ways that make people want to avoid him. He recognizes his cruelty, examines it, confesses it, and continues being cruel. His intelligence supplies an explanation for every failure. Eventually, the explanations become a kind of accomplishment in themselves.

Look how deeply I understand myself. Look how honestly I admit my ugliness. Surely that places me above those shallow people who go about their lives without examining anything.

Well, does it?

At what point does self-awareness become another expression of pride? At what point do we become so impressed with our ability to describe our brokenness that we stop asking what we are doing about it?

There is something particularly slippery about an excuse we already know is an excuse. We imagine that recognizing it somehow releases us from its grip. But we can understand exactly what we are doing and keep right on doing it.

Almost in Love with Our Own Shit

Let me put this plainly: sometimes we become almost in love with our own shit.

Our grievances become familiar companions. Our explanations become polished. We know who hurt us, what they did, and how it shaped us. We can tell the story with extraordinary precision.

And some of those stories describe terrible things. Betrayal. Abuse. Abandonment. Losses that changed the entire direction of a life. There are wounds that deserve careful attention and compassionate witnesses. I have spent too many years listening to people's pain to dismiss any of that.

But a story can become so settled that there is little room left for anything new. We begin interpreting every encounter through it. Another disappointment becomes confirmation. An act of kindness becomes suspicious. A possibility appears, and we explain why it cannot possibly work for someone like us. Before long, we are protecting the explanation as fiercely as we once protected ourselves.

The question becomes uncomfortable: What would happen if life offered us something our story could not account for? Would we let it in?

When Kindness Becomes Unbearable

One of the most painful parts of Dostoevsky's book involves Liza, a young woman to whom the Underground Man delivers an impassioned speech about suffering, love, and the possibility of a different life. He knows how to speak about tenderness. He can describe it beautifully.

Then she comes to see him and encounters the man behind the speech: ashamed, angry, vulnerable, and living in circumstances he finds humiliating. She responds with compassion. Here is an opening. Another human being sees his misery and reaches toward him.

He cannot bear it.

He could tolerate her vulnerability when it allowed him to feel superior. Receiving her tenderness requires something far more difficult. He has to allow himself to be seen without controlling the meaning of what she sees. So he wounds her.

That is where his endless self-examination becomes more than an unpleasant private habit. Another person pays for it. Pain can help us understand why we behave as we do. It does not erase the consequences of how we treat people. We still have to decide what we will do when kindness arrives, when someone challenges us, or when our pride begins demanding that somebody else be made small.

The Life We Keep Postponing

Most of us are considerably less extreme than the Underground Man. Still, some of his postponements may sound familiar.

When I understand why I do this, I will change. When I feel confident enough, I will reach out. When I have worked through everything, I will let someone get close. When I finally fix myself, I will begin living.

There is enough truth in these statements to make them persuasive. Understanding can help. Preparation can help. Some wounds require time, support, and considerable patience. But the finish line has a way of moving.

We reach one insight and discover another question. We resolve one uncertainty and encounter three more. Eventually, being ready becomes a condition that life can never quite satisfy. Meanwhile, the days keep passing.

Sometimes we have to make the phone call while we are still nervous. Have the conversation before we have rehearsed every possible response. Accept an invitation without knowing whether we will feel comfortable. Offer an apology without attaching a lengthy defense of why we behaved badly.

Sometimes we have to get out of our heads and do something. Something small counts.

Understand Something. Then Live Something.

I believe deeply in reflection. There is value in recognizing our defenses, understanding the stories we carry, and noticing how



fear and old pain shape our responses. There is also value in discovering what happens when we behave differently.

We accept kindness and learn that receiving it does not diminish us. We establish a boundary and discover that we can survive someone's displeasure. We take responsibility and find that admitting fault does not destroy our dignity. Those experiences give us something that thinking alone cannot supply.

There is a rhythm here, a kind of sashay between understanding and action. We reflect. We take a step. We discover where we struggle. We return with a better question, perhaps a little more humility, and try again. Sometimes insight makes action possible. Sometimes action makes a new insight possible.

And sometimes meaning begins to emerge because we have become involved in something beyond our own internal weather: a person to love, a responsibility to carry, a promise to keep, a useful task that needs doing.

For me, faith belongs here, too. I believe God meets us in our brokenness. I also believe His call reaches into the way we live: how we love, what we do with what we have been given, and whether we are willing to take the next faithful step without possessing the entire map.

Put Down the Explanation for a Moment

I eventually put the book down that Sunday afternoon. I admired what Dostoevsky had accomplished. I had also spent enough time in that underground.

What stayed with me was the tragedy of a man who could describe his prison so brilliantly while repeatedly defending the habits that kept him there. It left me with a question worth asking of myself:

Where have I become better at explaining my life than participating in it?

That question hit close to home. There was a time when I had plenty of explanations for my pain, and getting back into life still felt almost impossible.

I Had to Get Back into Life

I recognize some of this because a couple of decades ago, my own life flew apart. I went through a period so painful that I honestly wondered whether I would ever get out of it. Depression narrowed my world. I withdrew. I spent far too much time alone with my thoughts, trying to understand how I had gotten there and how I could possibly find my way back.

I went to therapy, and it helped enormously. I leaned into the pain. I read neuroscience. Over time, I began to understand my experience through the approaches that would eventually inform NeuroFaith®. Learning about autonomic nervous system dysregulation, heart rate variability, and the relationship between bodily states and emotion helped me make sense of why I felt so overwhelmed. I began to appreciate how profoundly the body and brain influence one another, and why thinking clearly could become so difficult when I was flooded with distress.

Internal Family Systems gave me another way to understand myself: the protective parts, the managers trying to keep everything under control, and the firefighters trying to extinguish pain when it became too much. I could begin to recognize what those defenses were attempting to do for me, even when their efforts were making my life smaller.

That understanding mattered. I remain grateful for it. But another part of healing required me to get up and move.



In clinical language, we call it behavioral activation. In my own life, it meant getting on my motorcycle. Back then, a Harley; in later years, my BMW R1250 RS. I rode and rode and rode. Riding gave me something to attend to beyond the endless conversation in my head. There was a road to follow and a world

outside my pain.

Movement also meant making the phone call. Getting up from my office, where I could so easily remain secluded, and going out to visit with people. Talking. Listening. Encouraging someone else. I accepted the invitation. Went to the dinner party. Went to a movie with Leah. These were ordinary things that, in the depths of my depression and paralysis of analysis, I had stopped doing.

I needed them back.

There were things I came to understand by reflecting on my life. There were other things I could only discover by participating in it. A conversation could remind me that I still had something to offer. An evening with Leah could make room for closeness and enjoyment. Showing up gave connection a chance to happen.

None of that made the pain imaginary or the work of therapy unnecessary. I needed help. I needed understanding. I needed to make sense of what was happening inside me. And I needed opportunities to experience something beyond it.

That is the blend I believe in: reflection and movement, understanding and participation. Sometimes I needed to sit with what hurt. Sometimes I needed to get out of my office and go talk to somebody. Healing asked both of me.



As a Christian, I came to see those ordinary steps as part of responding to God's invitation to keep living. I could take the next step with questions still unanswered. I could love Leah, encourage another person, and accept an invitation while there was still work to do inside me.

So, when I put Dostoevsky's book down that Sunday afternoon, I was thinking about more than a miserable man in a remarkable novel. I was remembering how small my own world had become, and how much it mattered that I began stepping back into it.

If you recognize yourself somewhere in these pages, I am not going to tell you that getting moving is easy. There were days when withdrawal felt far easier to me. But I also know that we can wait a very long time for the moment when we feel completely ready.

Make some sense of the pain. Get the help you need. Then leave room for a conversation, a shared meal, a ride, a small act of courage. Give life a chance to meet you somewhere beyond the place where you have been hurting.

I still had pain when I got back on that motorcycle. I still had questions when I made those calls and accepted those invitations. But I was participating again, and that became part of how I healed.

I did not finish understanding myself and then begin living. Getting back into life was part of how I found my way.

And looking back, I am grateful—to the people who helped me, to Leah, and to God, whose goodness I can now recognize in moments I could scarcely appreciate at the time. There was still life ahead of me when I could not imagine it. There was still love to give and receive. I am thankful I kept going.

God is good, isn't He?

