

Get Off the Couch and Get Over Yourself

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Усёрдие: diligence

A while back I decided to do a little project — something like a campaign for self-improvement through Russian culture, or maybe it was getting to know Russian culture through a self-improvement campaign. In any case, I worked my way — linguistically — through семь смертных грехов (seven deadly sins), which have entered Russian culture from the Church. Orthodoxy doesn't have the same categorizing zeal as Catholicism, so the list varied over the centuries.

But like in the Western Church, the sins were paired with various добродетели (virtues). The idea is that you cut out the sins and cultivate the corresponding virtues, ensuring good things in this life and the hereafter.

And then I ran out of steam. Позор! (For shame!) It appears that I committed the sin of уныние (moral torpor). This is when you don't believe in anything, don't care about

anything, and don't do anything — you know, the way you feel all winter, only without the excuse of snow. To get out of it, you need to apply the virtuous antidotes to уныние, which fall into two groups — spiritual and physical.

Physically you fight the лень (sloth) that accompanies despondency with such добродетели as усердие (diligence), старательность (great effort) and трудолюбие (industriousness). Усердие is a word very familiar to underachieving children: Учителя объясняют слабую успеваемость отсутствием усердия. (The teachers ascribed the poor success rate to a lack of effort.) But effort almost always pays off: При надлежащем усердии можно рассчитывать на хорошую отдачу. (With the right effort, you can count on good returns.)

Старательность has the sense of extra effort — giving it all you've got. This is admirable in an employee: Изо всех сил он стремился показать свою лояльность шефу и старательность в работе. (He tried as hard as he could to show his boss that he was loyal to him and went all out at work.) But, of course, not all great effort is a highway to heaven: Он с большой старательностью сливал из разных бутылок остатки водки себе в стакан. (He painstakingly poured the vodka dregs from several bottles into his glass.)

Finally, you could try to increase your overall трудолюбие, a word easily parsed as "love of work" (любить труд). This basically means: Get off the couch and get over yourself. Hard work is admirable: Самые ценные качества человека — трудолюбие и скромность. (The most valuable qualities in a human being are a strong work ethic and modesty.)

On the spiritual side, the antidote to despondency is вера (faith). Here we are not talking about belief in things, processes or people: Слабеет моя вера во всё синтетическое. (My trust in all things synthetic is wearing thin.) And we're not talking about fuzzy-wuzzy, feel-good faith: Верую в то, что в конце концов всё как-то успокоится, и на краю пропасти нас ждёт хэппи-энд. (I believe that ultimately everything will somehow work out, and at the very edge of the abyss a happy ending awaits us.)

No, we're talking about Faith with a capital F. This is вера as religious confession: Церковь надеется, что новое поколение удастся воспитать в вере. (The Church hopes that the new generation will be raised in the faith.) And вера as убеждение в существовании Бога (belief in the existence of God).

So, the Russian prescription for despair-busting is вера и трудолюбие (faith and hard work), which sounds an awful lot like modern psychological advice. Не унывай! (Cheer up!)

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