

College Essay  
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When I first found a small glass jar in the back corner of my grandmother's kitchen counter more than four years ago, I never expected that it would help to change the way I look at the world. Yet, it undoubtedly did. The jar was filled to its brim with octagonal labels that had been taken from Salada tea bags; on the back of each was an anonymous, one-sentence quotation. I looked through the labels casually—glancing at each quote for a few seconds before dropping it back into the jar—until I came across one that has stuck in my memory ever since: “The secret to happiness lies not in doing what one likes but in liking what one has to do.” I held the quotation between my fingers for quite some time before I finally returned it to its container.

That evening, I started a worksheet on the battles of the American Revolutionary War that was due the next day. However, I had barely gotten through the Battle of Bunker Hill before I found myself unable to continue: the tedious descriptions of generals, strategies, battle sites, and dates all seemed so meaningless. But then I thought back to the tea-bag label I had found earlier that day, and I decided that if I couldn't change the assignment, I could at least change my attitude toward it; since the worksheet has to be done anyway, I reasoned, I might as well strive to make it as enjoyable as I can. The surrender of General Burgoyne at Saratoga did not suddenly become fascinating after this decision, but I at least made it through the assignment without quite so much resistance.

Since that day, the idea expressed in the tea-bag quotation has come back to me again and again. Whether I am vacuuming my room, waiting in the dentist's office, or riding in the car for hours on end, I try to view the situation from a rational perspective. Why should I allow myself to become irritated by something that I have to do anyway? Why should I fill those moments with feelings of impatience and agitation when I could instead tolerate the circumstances and adjust my emotions around them?

This concept is not universally applicable, for there are many instances in which we should not try to change our emotional state. After a great loss, for example, it is healthier to ride the course of anger and sorrow than it is to suppress feelings of despair and distress. Furthermore, there are many times when annoying situations are avoidable, when difficult tasks are unnecessary, when troubling problems can be addressed. One should not try to make the best of a bad situation when the situation itself can be changed, and one should never invoke the doctrine of accepting one's misfortune as a justification for neglecting the suffering of other humans and animals. Rather, it is only the inconsequential annoyances of everyday life that we should dismiss. And in doing so, we can save our energy and concern for those things that truly matter.