Aliveness, Desire, and a Life Beyond Protection · About 4 minutes

When Looking Forward and Enjoying Differ

Listening to what an experience actually gives you

The novel finally arrives. Arlo has pictured the evening for months. A few pages in, he finds himself thinking about going to bed.

By bedtime, disappointment about a book had become something larger: perhaps he couldn't enjoy reading anymore.

This fictional example contains several experiences that are easy to collapse into one verdict. Arlo enjoyed anticipating the book. Reading it was less satisfying. Earlier that week, a conversation about another novel had absorbed him. Each detail belongs in the picture.

Looking forward to an experience and enjoying it when it arrives can differ. Research on reward distinguishes wanting, liking, and learning.[1] We cannot infer Arlo's brain activity from his evening, but the distinction helps us ask a better question than “Why didn't this make me happy?”

What interested him beforehand? What was engaging while he read? Was he tired, distracted, bored by this particular story? The answers may be ordinary. A favorite writer can write a book you don't like.

The same distinction can matter with a concert, a holiday, or dinner with friends. Anticipation is part of the experience, but it cannot guarantee the rest. Sometimes an event you barely wanted to attend surprises you. Sometimes something wonderful leaves you exhausted. Enjoyment and capacity deserve separate attention too.

Arlo could compare his account before and after the evening. “I couldn't get into this novel tonight” stays close to the experience. “I can't enjoy books anymore” reaches much further. That broader claim would require more than one disappointing evening to support it.

Having paid for the book, he may feel obliged to finish. Perhaps he later enjoys a chapter but resents the assignment the purchase has become. He is allowed to consider both the money and the reading. Finishing could matter to him; so could putting it aside.

Pleasure is not the only reason to persist. Difficult work, study, and commitments can be worthwhile without being enjoyable at every stage. The useful question is what makes this effort worth continuing, rather than whether every moment feels good.

Conditions also change. A ticket bought months ago meets you on a particular day, with whatever sleep, health, work, or caregiving has made available. An outing that would once have felt easy may now require support. Revising the plan can be a sensible response to those circumstances.

Try remembering the experience in three moments. Separate anticipation from what happened during it and how you felt afterward. The aim is to notice differences, not keep a score of your ability to enjoy life.

Arlo’s evening gives us a small way to tell looking forward apart from enjoying.

The book can stay on the table. Another evening may be better for reading, or he may discover he loved imagining it more than he loves this particular book.

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Companion reading · A Life That Is More Than Getting Through

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Aliveness, Desire, and a Life Beyond Protection (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Berridge, K. C., & Kringelbach, M. L. (2015). Pleasure systems in the brain. Neuron, 86(3), 646–664. Source.

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