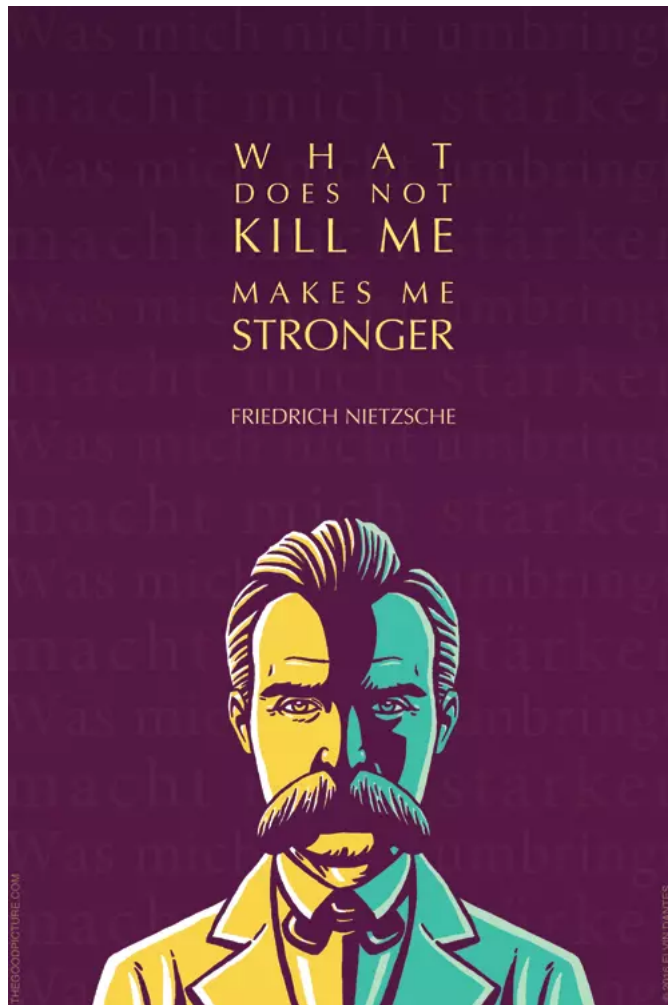


About Nietzsche's Maxim

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In publications like this one, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1840–1900) comes up a lot. Just about everybody knows his maxim, “What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” Or at least some version of it, the wording varies from speaker to speaker. Sometimes the reference is “us” rather than “me”: the 1982 movie “Conan the Barbarian” opens with the title card, “That which does not kill us makes us stronger—Friedrich Nietzsche.” Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy in the 1970s got a lot of

attention using this “us” version. A Kelly Clarkson song makes it “you”: “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, stronger.” Here’s my take on this dictum, another word for it.

In Nietzsche’s essay published in 1889, *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote: “Out of life’s school of war: what does not kill me makes me stronger.” Here, he likens life to being in a war, one that, if survived, has this personally strengthening outcome. I’m not sure if he was just talking about himself in this instance or setting out a fact of life that applies to everybody or just some people. He wrote a lot about a superior brand of human being, the *übermensch* in German, or overman or superman, so he may have been applying this axiom, yet another term for it, only to people of this higher sort and included himself—or a fictionalized version of himself, in real life Nietzsche wasn’t exactly a dynamo—among their number.

Although it has received little attention, with a different twist, Nietzsche got at this basic notion in an earlier collection of thought fragments entitled *Maxims of a Hyperborean*: “What does not destroy us—we destroy and it makes us stronger.” Notice in this case we become stronger not by enduring adversity or attack but rather by destroying what would destroy us.

With reference to the maxim as it stands in our time, it seems to me that whether the referent is “me,” “us,” or “you,” they all mean “a person”: that which doesn’t kill a person makes him or her stronger. And that “kill” is not to be taken literally. “Kill” means “devastates,” “personally destroys,” “shatters,” “debilitates,” “crushes”—where someone is brought down in a major, lasting way. And notice it isn’t about getting anything accomplished in this circumstance other than you becoming more capable.

Undoubtedly the popularity of this Nietzschean notion stems from the fact that despite its grim imagery—confronting something that could, figuratively anyway, kill you—it’s a positive, hopeful, feel-good idea. If things are really rough, keep the faith, because

getting through this ordeal is going to beef you up. In fact, if you are looking to get stronger—tougher, more resilient, less vulnerable, more battle ready—you might even be advised to seek out trouble, or at least not duck it when it shows itself, because it'll accomplish this good thing if you hang in there.

Amid all this optimism, however, we need to keep in mind that everything is what it is and isn't anything else. In this case, a maxim is a maxim and real life is real life. Reality is far more complex and one-of-a-kind than any maxim can capture. My experience with reality—actual existence, my own and from what I can discern from observing the lives of other people, both directly and indirectly through reading and film and such—leads me to conclude that what doesn't kill us indeed does makes us stronger . . . sometimes. And that the times it makes us stronger, it does so in every imaginable way and to every imaginable extent. And that sometimes what doesn't kill us doesn't strengthen us at all; rather, it diminishes us, hurts us, injures us, and again, in different ways and degrees. And that sometimes what doesn't kill us weakens us in some ways and strengthens us in others, and again in every possible combination, although I've noticed (if I'm not kidding myself) that the balance usually tips in favor of strengthens.

This last possibility—some combination of weakening and strengthening—seems to me the most likely outcome of survived adversity, and that leads me to a modification of this most famous Nietzsche maxim:

That which doesn't kill you will leave its scars, but on balance you'll be stronger than before. But then again, it might not happen that way in your case, so keep your eyes open and use your wits to do whatever is best for you in this particular instance.

Thus, when confronted with something that could kill you, you might be advised to fight like a wildcat, or placate, or work out a

deal, or finesse and con, or lay low, or cut and run, or just bear up under whatever it is; it's a judgment call.