
FEELING LUCKY?

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March 1, 2009

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Recently, I came across a very interesting article in *Newsweek* magazine. The article explored this question: “Why do some people survive accidents and natural disasters while others do not?” This question does not refer to events for which survival is impossible, such as a terrible plane crash or sudden catastrophe, but rather addresses dangerous situations in which certain individuals do survive. In these situations, then, are some people just luckier than others? Researchers in this area discovered a generally predictable phenomenon called the 10-80-10 rule: Typically, 10 percent of people in unexpected, dangerous events act correctly and take appropriate action. 80 percent of people freeze; facing an event for which they have no context or experience—having never seen a wall on fire, an oncoming train, or a collapsing building—most people search their minds and, finding no similar experience to guide them, simply do nothing. The last 10 percent do the wrong thing; they panic and run in to the fire or try to slow the tidal wave by closing a door. The *Newsweek* article then asks, “What is special about the 10% of people who do the right thing?” What enables them to survive when others don’t? In an economic environment that seems unprecedented and that presents challenges for which many of us have no reference, these questions are pertinent.

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How are survivors different than other people? Are they simply lucky, whereas others are somehow left out? Or do these lucky people act in special ways? The *Newsweek* article explores the idea of luck through a book titled *The Luck Factor*. Written by British psychologist Dr. Richard Wiseman, who spent three years studying luck through a series of experiments with more than 400 volunteers, this book identifies four “essential principles” that most people who consider themselves lucky have in common. The first principle is that lucky people maximize chance opportunities. People who survive—and even thrive—in adversity increase their chance to be lucky by creating a large network of relationships, because the more people one knows, the better the chances of “stumbling” on to a lucky event. Wiseman also discovered that lucky people have a calm alertness, which allows them to see possibilities that others, who may have a narrow, single-minded focus, miss. Wiseman conducted an illuminating experiment that revealed this quality. He interviewed two individuals—one who considers himself lucky, and one who considered himself very unlucky. He told these two volunteers that he would interview them in a coffee shop and arranged individual times to meet them there. In reality, the coffee shop itself was the experiment. Wiseman placed a five dollar bill on the step leading up to the coffee shop

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and arranged to have the shop filled with customers, except for one table, where he placed a wealthy businessman. The unlucky person approached the coffee shop. He was so focused on the interview, and apprehensive about his performance, that he missed seeing the five dollar bill. He then sat next to the businessman and, without saying a word to his table mate, waited nervously for the interview. Soon Wiseman arrived and asked him, "So, how was your morning?" "Oh, nothing special," he replied. "Same as usual." The lucky man later approached the shop. He spotted the bill, put in his pocket, sat down next to the businessmen, began a conversation, and exchanged business cards. Wiseman arrived and asked this man the same question. "I had a great morning," he answered. "I found a five-spot on the step and met a promising new business acquaintance. Lucky as usual!" The point is clear: same situation, different attitudes lead to different results—and different luck.

Wiseman's second principal is that lucky people listen to their intuition. They trust their gut feelings and act on them, in combination with analysis of the facts. These people also take steps to boost their intuition. Wiseman discovered that the majority of those who consider themselves lucky meditate on a regular basis. The third principle notes that lucky people expect good fortune. They assume that their good luck will continue and that their interactions

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with others will turn out well. Consequently, lucky people tend to believe that they can achieve their goals, so they persevere, even when others would give up. Wiseman conducted an experiment in which he showed lucky and unlucky people two puzzles; one solvable, and the other impossible to solve. He told the group that he would show them one of the puzzles at random, ask them to look at it, and then tell him which one it was—solvable or unsolvable. Actually, he showed both groups the same puzzle. Sixty percent of the lucky group, however, said that this was the solvable puzzle, whereas only 30 percent of the unlucky group thought so. In other words, lucky people believe that problems can be solved and have the confidence to believe in their ability to do so. Unlucky people tend to pessimistically believe the opposite.

The fourth principle is, for me, the most profound and revealing: Lucky people turn bad luck into good luck. They see the positive in even seemingly bad situations and do not dwell in negativity. Wiseman conducted a study in which he asked people to rate, on a scale of -3 (very unlucky) to $+3$ (very lucky), the following scenario: You are standing in line at a bank when suddenly a gunman bursts in and fires a shot that hits you in the arm. Unlucky people rated this as a -3 ; "That's a terrible situation!" they say. "Here I am, minding my own business, when I get shot in the arm. Just my bad luck!" Lucky

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people rate this as a +3. “I was very lucky,” they say. “I could have been shot in the head, or my spouse could have been shot, or a child could have been killed.” Luck, then, is a perspective: an inclination. In this light, there is no bad luck, just our choices about how we respond to the events of our lives. We can put the worst spin on these events, looking at the negative and bemoaning our fate, or we can choose to see with the eyes of gratitude for the good things that we do have, with the recognition that things could be much worse and that others suffer more than we do.

Wiseman suggests that we keep a “Luck Diary” and that we write down all the lucky things that happen to us. This is similar to the spiritual practice of listing our blessings. Jewish tradition asks that we count 100 blessings each day. In this context, blessings are not only our extraordinary good fortune but also we can find a blessing in waking up, in having a body that works, a bed to sleep on, a house to live in, food in the refrigerator, clothing to wear, a car/train to get to work, friends, family, the sun, trees, a planet to live on..... This is a powerful practice (and one that I much too often overlook) that enables us to see the abundance of good luck that we might usually take for granted.

The Talmud—the compilation of Torah interpretation—tells a story that illustrates this point. The

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great Rabbi Akiva, who was known to say, “Whatever happens is for the good,” once, came to a town looking for lodgings, but no one would give him shelter. He said, “Whatever happens is for the good.” So, he went and spent the night in an open field. He had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a lamp. A gust of wind came and blew out the lamp. A weasel came and ate the rooster. A lion came and ate the donkey. He said, “Whatever happens is for the good.” That same night, Roman soldiers came looking to capture Akiva (who defied the Roman’s capital offense ban against teaching Torah) but could not find him. He was not in a hotel, and thanks to the wind, they did not see his lamp light; thanks to the lion, they did not hear his donkey bray at night; and thanks to the weasel, they did not hear his rooster crow in the morning. “Didn’t I tell you,” Akiva later said, “Whatever happens is for the good?” [Note that I slightly altered the details of the ending to align with modern taste, without changing the intent.]

This is an overly neat story that might or might not be factually true, but it is meant to demonstrate an essential point: Our attitude about the difficult events in our lives is ours to choose. Akiva’s story, of course, implies a Divine intentionality that is ultimately beneficent. We might or might not believe that this is true; this is a leap of faith. Terrible things do happen to innocent people, for which we cannot

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see any positive outcome or intent, but, as Dr. Wiseman shows, our attitudes about the events in our lives can become self-fulfilling because when we expect the best—when we assume that things will work out, and that we can solve the inevitable challenges that arise—we are motivated to work to achieve positive goals. And vice versa. As Tennessee Williams wrote,

Luck is believing you're lucky.

Chance, often unwelcome, events do happen to us. That is a fact. Yet we can choose how we interpret these events and how we respond—whether we are lucky or unlucky; whether we are victims or are active partners in our lives. Several months ago, when I was home sick, my wife and I watched an Oprah Winfrey show that featured the astonishing story of a pregnant woman who went in to the hospital ready to give birth and came home dramatically changed. While at the hospital the doctors noticed that the woman's limbs had been attacked by terrible flesh-eating bacteria, which required that her arms and legs be amputated. The woman woke up with a new baby and no limbs. Her first reaction was gratitude that her baby was healthy and that she was alive. She then immediately resolved to learn to live with her new prosthetic limbs. "My baby needs me," she said. This amazing woman actually saw her loss as an opportunity to demonstrate to her child the

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qualities of tenacity and determination. Compared to this, our struggles are only small bumps in the road. And, perhaps, these bumps are exactly what are needed to get our attention, keep us from falling asleep at the wheel, and make the ride more interesting.

Wishing you much luck,
Alan