
THREE ON ADVERSITY

Rabbi Alan Lurie

Three on Adversity

“Life Is Difficult.” This short aphorism is the opening sentence of M. Scott Peck’s best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*. Published in 1978, this book sold more than 7 million copies and has been translated into more than 23 languages. Peck, a clinical psychologist, wrote *The Road Less Traveled* in order to merge his understanding of psychology with spiritual teachings and to create an approach that promotes personal growth on all levels. He opened with this simple sentence to reaffirm an essential but troubling truth that any human being must already know: *Life is difficult*. Peck continued

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Peck later argues that it is our unwillingness to accept this simple truth—due to our fear of suffering, our reluctance to release our childish belief that we should not need to struggle, and our desire to think that life should be easy—that leads to neurosis. This is because if we cannot accept that life is inherently difficult, when the inevitable difficulty occurs, we will either blame ourselves (there must be something wrong with me) or blame others (why is the world so screwed up?), instead of facing the difficulty realistically.

Three on Adversity

Peck notes that his observation is very similar to the Buddhist doctrine of the Four Noble Truths; the Buddha's roadmap to enlightenment. These truths follow:

- **The Nature of Suffering:** As human beings we naturally face suffering.
- **The Origin of Suffering:** We suffer when we become attached to things that are transient and beyond our control.
- **The Cessation of Suffering:** It is possible to end our suffering.
- **The Path to the Cessation of Suffering:** We can end suffering by changing our actions and beliefs.

What Peck and the Buddha are telling us is that a first step to personal and spiritual growth is the basic realization that bad things happen: Coffee spills on our new suit; we argue with our spouse and children; the deal we were chasing falls through; we don't get the hoped-for promotion; financial firms that were unshakable bastions of Wall Street stability falter; economies recess; people get ill...and more. In my experience as a Rabbi, I've discovered that the most troubling spiritual question on most peoples' mind is, "Why is there so much suffering in the world?" Rabbi Harold Kushner famously asked, "Why bad things happen to good people" and concluded that bad things are not rewards or

Three on Adversity

punishments but are simply facts of nature. Our call is to respond to these inevitable bad things with as much courage and compassion as possible. We are still left with the basic question, though: “Why do bad things happen at all? Why can’t life be always easy and comfortable? Wouldn’t life be better if we didn’t need to struggle so much?: This question—“Why is life difficult?”—is at the heart of philosophical and theological explorations. Not surprisingly, there are many different theories and many possible answers. I would like to briefly present a few that I find compelling. Some might resonate with you, some may sound flat, but hopefully you will be exposed to a few provocative ideas.

The first idea may be stated as

Difficulties Foster Growth

The ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, stated

The greater the difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it. Skillful pilots gain their reputation from storms and tempests.

In other words, it is only through the difficult process of challenging ourselves that we grow. By responding to challenges, we develop skills, and the effort of hard work and well-earned accomplishments elevates us. Without facing difficulties and overcoming adversities, we simply would not grow. I read a wonderful allegory about this idea (although I

Three on Adversity

can't remember where. If you recognize this, please let me know its source). There was a man who loved to golf. His game, though, was not as good as he wanted, and he was constantly frustrated. Finally, after missing a simple putt, he called out to the heavens, "Please God. If only I could hit a hole-in-one every time, I would be happy." He hears a voice respond, "Your desire is granted." The man then turns, hits the ball, and it sails right into the hole. He swings again, and the second ball lands squarely behind the first. Elated, he calls to his friends, and they are amazed at his new powers. He goes on tour and becomes famous and rich. People flock to see this miracle. But the novelty quickly wears off, and people soon become bored watching the same results every time. Every swing—a hole-in-one. The man too is now bored, and he begins to hate the game that he once loved. He tries to deliberately miss so that the game will be more interesting, as it once was, but no matter where he swings, the ball finds the hole.

Finally, he returns to the golf course where he received his wish, and throws his clubs into the lake.

"God," he cries, "why did you grant me this foolish wish?" The voice replies, "Who said I was God?"

The second approach to understanding life's difficulty might be stated as

Difficulties Develop Character

Three on Adversity

Arthur Golden, author of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, wrote

Adversity is like a strong wind. It tears away from us all but the things that cannot be torn, so that we see ourselves as we really are.

This belief, that difficulties test and reveal our character, is an often answered response to the question of why bad things happen. The response is based on the understanding that we, as human beings, have the ability to choose how we think and act. Unlike most other animals, who act primarily or solely on instinct, humans have been given the gift, and the responsibility, of consciousness. There is a beautiful Midrash—a Jewish tale based on Bible text—that comes from the story of the creation of human beings. In this Midrash, after Adam, the primordial human, is created in “the image of God,” the angels appeal to God and ask

“Why do you love human beings more than us?”

“How can you think this?” God rhetorically answers. “As angels you live forever, in constant communion with the Divine. Unlike human beings, you will never struggle to grow food, suffer in the heat of the summer or cold of the winter, get ill, and die.”

“Yes”, they agree. “But You have given humans a gift that we will never have. They can consciously choose to do good. They can choose to grow, to

Three on Adversity

create, and to love. We have no such choices, so they can reach heights that we have never dreamed of.”

We know, to varying degrees, that our actions and attitudes are totally within our control and that we have choices. Difficulties, then, are necessary so that we can be faced with a choice; between compassion or anger, action or resignation, generosity or selfishness, growth or decay. Without the possibility of adversity, we could make these choices. The purpose of most religions and ethical systems is to help guide us to choose the right, moral road. Through this choice, we elevate not only ourselves, but also society as a whole. In this light, the 17th-century German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz wrote that the world in which we live is the best possible world that God could have created. This statement is often misunderstood. Leibniz is not saying that the world is as good as it could be, (it is our responsibility to improve the world), but the system that creates adversity and allows for the possibility of bad things is necessary so that we can choose the good. A world without such choices can never be as good as the potential that exists in our world.

The last approach to understanding life’s difficulty might be stated as

Difficulties challenge our limited perceptions and develop faith.

At the end of the movie *Charlie Wilson’s War*, the CIA agent, who has been working with

Three on Adversity

Congressman Wilson to overthrow the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, looked back on the operation (which eventually led to the tyrannical rule of the Taliban and the training of international terrorists), and told Wilson a story about a Zen Master. The Zen Master hears that a boy has been given a horse. "How wonderful," the people shout. "We'll see," says the Zen Master. Then the boy falls off his horse and breaks his leg. "How terrible," the people cry. "We'll see," says the Zen Master. Then a war breaks out, and the boy is spared from service because of his broken leg. "How wonderful," the people shout. "We'll see," says the Zen Master. As the Zen Master taught, we simply often don't have the perspective to know whether something that seems like a difficulty is, in fact, bad.

How often have we faced a situation that seemed like a disaster—that made us cry out, "Why is this happening to me?"—only to find later that this "disaster" was actually exactly what we needed at that moment to protect us, guide us, and perhaps push us toward a higher goal that we would not have moved toward otherwise.

Psalm 126 contains the paradoxical words

Those who sow in tears will reap in joyous song.

What this Psalm is saying, I believe, is that when we face difficult time—times of tears—we should

Three on Adversity

be at our most energetic, most diligent, most expansive, most open, and most compassionate. If at these times we can muster the confidence to plant seeds in our personal, professional, and spiritual life, we will see that our positive actions during difficult times will reap well-earned rewards. We will see that, as M. Scott Peck taught, when we know this truth, we will embrace life's difficulties as welcome opportunities for growth.

Wishing you a (not too) difficult week!
Alan