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2.3.

… And So Are the Roadblocks

When Christopher Columbus lost his first and only love after only 18 months of marriage, he chose to deal with his sorrow by putting all his energy into convincing the Portuguese emperor to support his venture of finding a shorter route to India. Without this focus and drive, he probably would not have discovered America.

After Ludwig van Beethoven went deaf, he composed some of the most beautiful and well-known pieces of music known to man. He composed his 9th Symphony, which many experts say could not have been written by someone who had not experienced both the lighter and the darker sides of life.

We too can learn to turn all our greatest difficulties in life into something good. But we can't do this by avoiding difficulty. Instead, we have to look our difficulties in the eye. This is as crucial for individuals as it is for businesses. In the last section I described how we can choose to develop a constructive outlook on the daily difficulties in our lives. In this section we will examine how it is possible to maintain such an outlook even in times of actual crisis.

Sometimes it can be difficult to accept the simple fact that we can't control every aspect of our lives. My punctual taxi driver, whom I told you about in another section, was reminded of this in a dramatic way when he woke up one day and discovered that he couldn't move. He couldn't even dress himself and had to call for help to get to the hospital.

He was diagnosed as having Guillain-Barré Syndrome and the doctors couldn't say how much bodily function he would recover. This came as a complete shock to him, of course. Fortunately, he got better. Today he is fully recovered. After this experience he says that there is so much we take for granted in life that we shouldn't. A measure of humility and thankfulness definitely has its place.

Sometimes I think that we in the industrialized world are not very good at handling crises. Maybe our high standard of living materially has fooled us into believing that only people in third world countries experience suffering and misfortune – that it is not a part of our highly civilized and well-organized society.

But this is not true. As far as pain and suffering are concerned, it doesn't matter how much money you have. We are all equals. From time to time, we all encounter such crises as death, injury, sickness, deceit, childlessness, misfortune in love, or becoming the victims of crime.

These are all different parts of life, but many of us become good at shutting out anything disturbing. Refusing to see such things, however, only makes us more vulnerable. We are then much less prepared when they actually hit. Convincing ourselves that such things will never happen to us only makes the subsequent shock even greater.

These days we have quite a good understanding of how we generally react to crises; see the chart at the end of this section. It's important to notice, however, that no matter how hard we take a particular crisis, it is not certain that we will react exactly as described in this chart. We may skip some stages entirely, or we may move through them in a different order than the one described here. It is also completely possible to feel both happy and sad at the same time. People are people and theories are merely theories. Every theory is but a simplification of reality.

Nevertheless, our first reaction is usually one of shock, which is followed by denial. "This isn't happening," we tell ourselves. Swedish singer Louise Hoffsten describes her experiences with shock and denial in her book *Blues* in the section that tells about the day she found out that she had MS (Multiple Sclerosis):

The doctor calling my name interrupted my thoughts. I put down my magazine and walked into his office. He asked me to sit down in the chair in front of his desk. I was feeling better after my trip, I told him. The dizziness was almost gone and the numbness wasn't as bad.

He interrupted my continued babbling by saying:

"The testing has indicated that you have MS."

"What?"

"You have MS! MS!"

I saw a mouth forming those two letters. Nothing else. The mouth continued to form other letters, but I couldn't make any sense out of them for the life of me. What he was saying sounded like an endless stream of gibberish, and I was starting to wonder if he had a speech impediment. I couldn't hear a word of what he was saying. It all felt so unreal.

"Isn't MS supposed to be hereditary?" I asked.

"It is possible that it is passed on genetically, but we just don't know for sure."

I thought it had to be a mistake. My image of the disease was that it was something that only very old people could get – old people who then ended up in wheelchairs.

"Isn't there a cure?"

"No. It is chronic, and it's too early to start you on the medications. They have serious side effects, and so you shouldn't start taking them until you absolutely have to. You might never even experience these symptoms again. It's impossible to say."

The doctor told me to go home and go on with my life as usual. I was to give him a call if the symptoms returned. In a trance, I went out, got into a taxi and rode to the Stockholm Globe Arena. The doctor had told me to go on living as usual. "The show must go on!" But nothing was the same anymore. After rehearsal, I called my parents and told them what the doctor had said. I was still quite calm, but my mom was terribly upset. I had to calm her down by saying that it would probably be okay. It was all probably just a big mistake. I asked if anybody else in our family had MS, but she said that she didn't know of anybody. We were both sure that the hospital was going to call any time now to tell us that there had been a mix-up with the test results or that they had made an incorrect diagnosis. But that call never came.

When experiencing shock, we become almost impervious to the world around us. There is so much new information to try to comprehend that we have to exclude the rest of the world for a while. That is why professionals who help people in shock must have a high level of competence when it comes to communication skills. Shock and denial play important roles in helping people get used to dramatic changes in their lives. In a crisis, it would be too much to take in everything at once. Instead of letting us get overwhelmed, shock and denial work as a filter to protect us from too much at once.

We can experience shock and denial even in minor catastrophes. I remember one time when I was getting a can of soda from the fridge. Unfortunately, the entire shelf decided to come with the can of soda. Everything on the shelf landed in a pile on the floor. My first thought was, "This isn't happening to me." It didn't feel real. We have all probably had these kinds of experiences – minor shocks followed by denial.

When we move past denial, we usually become either sad or angry, or perhaps both at once. We can also experience other emotions at the same time. With the possible exception of Southern Europeans though, we Westerners are usually bad at showing our feelings. It is not generally acceptable to show that you are really sorrowful, disappointed or angry.

Suppressing your feelings traps them inside you in the form of negative energy. This results in muscle and joint pain and saps the energy you need to get through the day. It is better to let your feelings of sorrow or anger take their natural course.

Children are usually much better at showing their feelings than adults. They have a good cry and then it's over. They jump right back into what they were doing and have a great time. I have to admit that in certain ways, I felt much more alive in this sense when I was a child. When I was sad, I really was sad and when I was happy, I really was happy. I experienced it throughout my whole body. Winter was winter and summer was summer. Now most of it feels more like different nuances of gray. We adults have much to learn from children.

When we let our feelings take their natural courses, then we move along through a process of grief that leads to healing. Unfortunately, many of us have been taught that moving through sorrow or grief is a negative thing. Grief instead can be seen as a way to work through dramatic changes in life. What we have to watch out for during this process is that we don't let our grief drag out for the rest of our lives and that we don't let our anger turn into permanent bitterness.

In 1994, Sweden experienced a national disaster when the passenger ship *Estonia* sunk and 852 people lost their lives. Among those killed were people from Sweden, Finland and Estonia. After the disaster, opinion was divided on whether or not to recover the ship and salvage the bodies. The three governments involved decided against recovery and declared the site a burial-ground.[1]

I can't help thinking that many of the survivors and surviving relatives of the *Estonia* disaster have let themselves fall into a prolonged process of collective grief. Divers have recently discovered bodies at the wreck, and surviving family members have demanded that these remaining bodies and the wreck should be recovered. I have to ask: What good will this do? I see this as an indication that these people have not been able to leave this tragedy behind them and go on with their lives.

I do understand how tragic it is for the people who have lost loved ones on the *Estonia*. It must be a tremendous trial to have to go through. At the same time, "There is a time for everything under the sun," as it says in the Bible. There is a time to grieve. There is a time for joy. I don't believe that the victims of this shipwreck would want their surviving loved ones to live the rest of their lives in deep grief. This doesn't mean that you should forget. It only means that life goes on and continues throwing new challenges at you.

If you had led an active life before this kind of disaster, and if you were used to taking initiative in your life, then you would have an easier time of getting back on your feet. You will have learned that it is up to you to make what you want of your life.

It could be much more difficult if you have not thought much about what you want out of life and are not working toward definite goals. Without these goals, you do not have something to pull you forward. You may begin to doubt that it's even worth living on. While we're on the subject, how would you rate your life right now? Is it a good life or just okay? On a scale of one to ten, what would you give it?

This prolonged grieving process that some of the relatives of *Estonia* victims seem to be experiencing reminds me of an emotional state I once experienced in my own life. It is like the atmosphere in the organization that my parents were members of when I was a child. It was an organization for the parents of children with disabilities. It is true that there was much assistance to be found within that organization, but there was also an attitude among the parents of encouraging one another to feel sorry for one another.

As in the *Estonia* situation, there were many members of this organization that never seemed to get over the fact that they had a child with a disability. They stayed up until all hours at conferences sobbing and drinking. But their children were just as happy as other children.

These parents were not seeing what other people could see, and that is that their children have much to give despite their disabilities. The truth is that many of these children have even more to give than they would have without their disabilities. What is strange is that the number of these "sobbing parents" increased even though societal support was improving. When my parents joined the organization at the beginning of the 60s, there was no time left for sobbing over the situation. Instead, the organization worked hard to improve conditions for the children and to secure the survival of the organization itself. Twenty years later I myself was active in the organization and living standards for disabled people had been greatly improved. Oddly enough, it was then that the great number of sobbers started showing up.

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[1] I guess I have to tell you, by the way, that on the very same day, a couple of hours before the *Estonia* tragedy, I saw the film *The Red Movie* by famous Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski. A major theme in the movie is that of a passenger liner that sinks. I went to the movie together with a friend who is now sitting right beside me, assisting me in editing this text. Call it coincidental, if you prefer, or call it synchronicity – a subject that is covered in my section on trust. In fact, that's what that entire movie is about – synchronicity – so go and see it!

This friend of mine, who is sitting right beside me, has a favorite saying that goes like this:

Everything connected

Can this be because when the parents were in the middle of improving the situation for their children during the 60s, they just didn't have time for feeling sorry for themselves? All their spare time was taken up with this work. And since they were busy with changing things for their children and for themselves, they experienced the feeling of accomplishing something important. They had the sense of things moving forward. They had important goals to achieve.

But as soon as they had accomplished what they had set out to accomplish, they didn't have anything more to fight for. They had succeeded. Society had taken a greater share in the responsibility of supporting their children. But that brought with it to a certain degree a lack of control and influence. Suddenly their children were considered sick and therefore in the need of professional and specialized care. The parents were no longer in control of what was happening. New parents learned from caretakers that their children had to be treated in a very special way. The situation for those new parents was actually more traumatized than it had been before.

It is not always completely positive when society takes the greater part of the responsibility for taking care of people in different sorts of difficulty. It is probably a matter of how that assistance is structured. When we help others, we need to do it with a great measure of respect, so that we do not take away that person's own responsibility for his situation. It's crucial to learn how to help people in crisis without victimizing them.

There may be another reason that more parents seem to be stuck in a prolonged state of shock today when they give birth to a disabled child. Could it be that we in the industrialized world have been experiencing such a high standard of living for such a long time, that the idea of having a disabled child has somehow become awkward? Is this similar to what happened in the *Estonia* disaster? From Finland and Estonia there was no public cry to salvage the ship or recover the bodies. It was not so long ago that people in these countries experienced the horrors of war. As a result of this, they developed some sort of familiarity with disaster. But here in Sweden the circumstances are different. When was the last time Sweden faced disaster? How many generations ago?

What effect does this unaccustomedness with disaster have on the relatives of the *Estonia* victims? Does it make it more difficult for them to leave the disaster behind? How can this example help us so that we do not force ourselves into a state of prolonged grief and self-pity?

Have you ever experienced some kind of life-changing ordeal? What was the most difficult thing about it? Have you learned to live with what has happened?
Have you ever helped anyone else go through such an ordeal?

Unfortunately, many people facing life-changing ordeals get lost in this kind of bitterness or depression. For many, this is a way to avoid taking responsibility for the rest of their lives. For both bitterness and depression cause you to feel sorry for yourself. Feeling sorry for yourself often leads directly to even greater disaster. This can land you in a vicious cycle in which you feel that you have no control over your situation. This in turn can lead you to feel even sorrier for yourself.

This situation can in fact offer a false sense of comfort in which it is easy to ignore your responsibility for changing your attitudes and lifestyle. Absurd as it is, you might even refuse all outside help. You become so comfortable that you don't want to hear anything about possible ways of improving your situation.

You would rather gather people around you who reinforce you in feeling sorry for yourself. Our society is overflowing with people like this. They find their importance in feeling needed and being able to take care of others in this way. This creates many mutually dependent relationships in which one person plays the role of "the savior in time of need" and the other plays "the helpless victim". You can often see this kind of relationship in the healthcare and social care sectors. People in such unhealthy relationships tend to hold on to them at any price in order to avoid change.

Most of us have days when we would rather stay in bed – days in which we are in a bad mood, and it is completely okay to have days like this. I myself have days like this, and it doesn't bother me at all. Sometimes we have to recuperate before going on with our lives. It is unnatural, however, to let ourselves get caught up in a prolonged state of self-pity.

It's healthier to try to find new ways of carrying on with our lives after a crisis. Once we have moved through the process of grief and healing, we ought to move further into a stage of reconciliation. We may then begin gradually to think about how to reorganize our lives. We begin to consider what kind of life we would like to live from this point forward, which can lead to us

finding new goals to strive toward as well as a new set of values and priorities. When we reach these new goals, we feel successful, and this feeling leads us on to setting new goals and on into the rest of our lives.