

Silver Linings
By Michael A. Schuler
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When Things Go Awry—Two Views

Mary K, Ft. Worth, Texas, *The Sun*, Dec. 2006

On my seventh birthday, my father died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage, leaving my mother to raise five children by herself. She suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized. When she returned home, she medicated herself with bourbon. Her mantra became, “We can’t afford it. We’ll never make it.”

Predictably, I married a charming man whose heavy drinking seemed normal to me, given my childhood. I was an over-achiever and squirreled away every bonus and raise, my mother’s mantra never far from my mind.

Eight years after we’d married, my husband and I agreed that his drinking was excessive. We attended support groups and marriage counseling sessions. My bank account continued to grow, but my childhood sense of “never having enough” remained. We lived frugally, and my husband, whose expertise was finance, kept track of our investments.

One day, preparing to leave on a business trip, I went to the bank to withdraw some money from a special business account only I could access. I was informed that I had recently emptied that account—\$7,000—with a check made out to “cash.”

I drove straight to my husband’s office. He had no choice but to tell me the truth: for three years he had been gambling compulsively. He had doctored our monthly bank statements and maxed out the credit cards. He’d forged my name to clean out my account because his bookies were threatening him.

My mother’s mantra had come true: we really *weren’t* going to make it. I told my husband to give me his house key, and I filed for divorce.

It didn’t end there. My ex-husband’s bankruptcy filing absolved him of his responsibility to pay me the money stipulated in our divorce agreement. Bill collectors started calling. The IRS came knocking; I had unknowingly signed fraudulent tax returns prepared by my husband. Thanks to the compounded interest, the amount I owed the government was staggering. It took me years to pay it all off, and I teetered many times on the brink of despair. In the process, though, I learned that my worst fear could come true, and it wouldn’t kill me.

Fifteen years later I’ve lost my fear of economic insecurity. I recently gave up a six-figure salary to

take a job I love for a fifth of my former income. I have become a more generous person. I trust that there will *always* be enough.

Rachel Naomi Remen, My Grandfather’s Blessings

In my grandmother Rachel’s kitchen, nothing was ever wasted. When she was a young wife in Russia, there was not always enough food, and sometimes the family went hungry...

A family story is told about my grandmother’s icebox that may or may not be true. I have heard it ever since I was quite small. Grandmother’s icebox was a deep source of a truly amazing outpouring of goodness. It was always full to the very edges—every shelf, every nook and cranny was put to use. Occasionally when someone, usually a child, opened it without sufficient caution, an egg would fall out and break on the kitchen floor.

My grandmother’s response was always the same. She would look at the broken egg with satisfaction. “Aha!” she would say, “today we have a sponge cake.”

Befriending life is not always about having things your own way. Life is impermanent and full of broken eggs. But what is true of eggs is even more true of pain and loss and suffering. Certain things are just too important to be wasted.

When I was 16, just after the doctor had come and informed me that I had a disease that no one knew how to cure, my mother reminded me of this. I had turned toward her in shock, but she did not cuddle or soothe. Instead, she reached out and took me by the hand. “Rachel,” she said firmly, “now we will make a sponge cake.”

Life wastes nothing. Over and over again every molecule that has ever been is gathered up by the hand of life to be reshaped into yet another form ... Even great pain is blessed with impermanence ... drop by drop it can be slowly transmuted into compassion, or wisdom or some other tender sentiment.

Success Is Relative

from John R. O’Neill, *The Paradox of Success*

Success can be defined in many ways, including the simple attainment of a goal or doing a good job at any endeavor. We can speak of being successful in a marriage, as a parent, a friend, a teacher. But these kinds of achievements are usually not the first thing that comes to mind when we call someone successful. In

our society they lack the glamour and allure of what I call “mythic success”—a potent elixir compounded of wealth, power, privilege, and freedom from care....

In almost every age, success has either been celebrated or painted in the darkest of colors, although certain times in history seem to bring its perils into high relief. The 1920s, for instance, produced a definitive American novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Near the end of Scott Fitzgerald’s tale of corrupted innocence and loneliness at the top, the narrator pinpoints the “sky’s-the-limit” attitude that uniquely characterizes the American dream of mythic success....

Mythic success still exerts a powerful pull. But its high cost and paradoxical nature are becoming clearer... [business guru] Tom Peters has said that the cost of excellence is the giving up of family vacations, little league games, birthday parties, evenings, weekends, lunch hours, gardening, reading, movies, and most other pastimes.

“I have a number of friends,” Peters wrote, “whose marriages or partnerships were crumbling under the weight of their devotion to a dream. And so, I am frequently asked whether it is possible to ‘have it all’—a fully satisfying personal life and a fully satisfying hard working one. My answer is ‘No.’”

But what kind of excellence is this? Is the kind of success worth having that takes such a high toll on one’s health, relationships and peace of mind ...?

When success no longer satisfies our “higher needs” for belonging, affection, dignity, respect, appreciation, honor, as well as for self-actualization and the fostering of truth, beauty, and justice ... then it truly fails us.

Reflections

“**W**hy do bad things happen to good, or innocent, people” is a question human beings have been asking for about as long as we’ve had the language to pose it. It is the central concern of the Old Testament book of Job, whose author probably drew inspiration from older Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources.

The question remains pertinent because answers have always remained elusive or somewhat inadequate. We humans seem to have a hard time accepting “things as they are.” We have this hankering, this persistent itch to make sense of our experience. We want to know whether suffering has underlying significance—whether life was *meant* to be mean or is only apparently so.

Interestingly, however, few serious thinkers have bothered to turn the matter on its head. The question “why do *good* things happen to people” is just as relevant but seldom expressed. We tend to take the good for granted but are confounded and confused by that which pains or oppresses us.

And yet the difference between these two experiences—the benign and the malign—isn’t always that clear-cut. As the poet William Blake observed in the hymn we sang just a few moments ago, “Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine.” So it’s not just a matter of life being composed of these two contrasting threads. Often they become tangled together, the black and white bleeding into one other. What is fortune and what is misfortune? That which seems clear on the surface of things becomes a lot murkier when we begin to probe a little deeper.

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This was driven home to me when I read recently about a pro football player’s prospects once he’d left that brutal sport. Tiki Barber, was the subject of one essay. An outstanding running back for the New York Giants for nine years, Barber retired last month. He leaves the game relatively unscathed and with the prospect for a career in broadcasting. But in both respects he is quite exceptional.

You see, the pounding football players endure is unbelievable. Barber compares it to repeatedly falling off a tall ladder or being struck by an automobile. In the early 1990s, Barry Word ran for the Kansas City Chiefs for only six seasons, stepping off the field for good at the age of 28. Now 42, he complains that “my knees, my feet, my shoulders, my wrists—I ache all over. Sometimes I have a difficult time just walking.” This helps explain why the average length of a running back’s pro career is just two and a half years.

Nearly 40% of all former NFL players have degenerative arthritis. According to reporter Adam Gopnik, 78% are unemployed, bankrupt, or divorced within two years of leaving the game. “And those,” he says, “are the guys who ‘make it.’” The dreams of most pro aspirants are never met. They reach the NFL only to be injured or unceremoniously cut loose without having played a single down in a regular season game.

But given the problems *successful* players encounter when their careers end, perhaps those who *fail* are really the lucky ones. “Making it” in pro football by no means guarantees financial security, and it hardly produces a sustainable sense of satisfaction and well-being. In most instances, just the opposite occurs.

Inquiries into the lives of lottery winners produces similar findings. With their daily struggles to make ends meet, people often speculate that winning the lottery would solve a lot of problems. But for many whose dream of living on easy street has come true, lottery wealth has proven a burden more than a boon. Not a few Powerball winners have reported that their marriages, friendships, and familial relationships have suffered; that they now contend with anxiety and depression. Some are in even *worse* shape financially than *before* their ship came in.

All of which reminds me of the minister who insisted that its just as important to pray for a person when they experience success as when they suffer a severe set-back. What John O’Neill described as, “mythic” success—success accompanied by significant money, power, privilege, and public acclaim—puts us at high risk for losing much that we cherish: our most important relationships, our powers of judgment, even our souls.

Success is dangerous because you can never have too much of it. Unlike cows and cats, humans are endowed with a persistent sense of the unsatisfactoriness of life. As far as the average human psyche is

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When we are flush with success, it’s not easy to step back and become aware of its negative capabilities. As pleasant and affirming as it feels, success always demands its pound of flesh: a breeding ground for envy and resentment in others, it causes us to overextend ourselves as we try to maintain our status, and creates a vicious cycle of competition among those who strive.

Erik Erikson, one of the truly great pioneers in the field of psychology, provides an object lesson. According to his daughter, Sue Erikson Boland, Erikson’s “brilliance was coupled with an over-

whelming need to achieve.” Despite his renown Erik Erikson

... never felt that he had arrived safely anywhere, and he continued to feel anxious at the height of his success.... Public applause and admiration were intoxicating while they lasted and were even addictive. But when the applause was over, my father experienced a let-down, a feeling of abandonment, and a diminished pleasure in every-day living.

Don’t get me wrong: “winning” is wonderful, and I can think of few greater pleasures than collaborating with highly motivated, success-oriented people. But we also need to be prepared for the unexpected turbulence that generally follows in the wake of victories and high achievements. Not a few of those who initially declared that winning the lottery was the *best* thing that ever happened to them later reported that they wished they’d never been so lucky.

But now let’s consider the flip side of the coin—the misfortunes that discolor our perception, deflate our egos, and cause us seriously to question life’s goodness.

As the earlier readings from Rachel Naomi Remen and Mary K. suggested, many if not most people find it difficult to simply sit and stew in their own juices. We really *don’t* want to feel abused by life; the victim’s mantel doesn’t sit comfortably on our shoulders, and so we search for some ray of light to help dispel the shadows that have gathered around us.

That’s why, in the Old Testament book that bears his name, Job seeks a solution to the riddle of his extreme suffering. Note that he never really asks for an *end* to his suffering, just an *explanation* for it. Job knows that he can endure and even accept his condition as long as it isn’t undeserved or meaningless. In other words, Job is looking for that “silver lining” that would make the experience of suffering redemptive and thus relieve his mental, if not his physical anguish.

And indeed, it is one of the perennial purposes of theology and religion to point out the silver linings that make those dark clouds in our lives seem less ominous. When he is confronted with God’s grandeur, and is reminded of the deep mystery of His ways, Job comes to terms with his situation. When the Hindu devotee accepts suffering as a payment toward his or her accumulated karmic debt, it becomes easier to bear. When the Buddhist contemplates the lotus blooming amidst the mud and muck,

he understands that even in the ugliest of circumstances, the possibility for enlightenment still exists.

An abundance of aphorisms speak to this issue. “No one hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it,” the English poet John Donne assures us. Echoing that sentiment, Benjamin Franklin declared, “Those things that hurt, instruct us.”

And there is Rainer Maria Rilke, “This is how we grow—by being defeated, decisively, by even greater things.”

And the contemporary novelist Madeleine L’Engle writes: “It’s a good thing to have all the props pulled out from under us occasionally. It gives us some sense of what is rock under our feet, and what is sand.”

These are silver linings, and if some of the preceding sounds a bit glib, one can point to any number of authorities who will confirm them. For example, after he had suffered a devastating stroke that left him severely crippled, the spiritual writer and teacher Ram Dass reflected on his situation. What affected him the most, he said, was not the physical pain—which was quite intense at times—but the change in status from a self-sufficient individual to one completely dependent on others for care and basic bodily maintenance.

Throughout rehabilitation, Ram Dass continued to reflect and meditate on that troubling issue and slowly he began to see his misfortune in a new light. “Now,” he says, “I’ve found that the psychological stuff ... has ceased to have so much importance for me”

And that’s because I’m more in my *Soul* level, where it’s just “Here’s independence, there’s dependence—what a beautiful tapestry...!” That’s why the stroke hasn’t turned out as bad as I once would have anticipated—because it’s pushed me to a higher level.... I identify more with my Soul now, and to the Soul, things like disability and pain and dependence aren’t tragic, they’re just ... poignant.

Similarly, when he was in his mid-thirties and about to embark on what promised to be a stellar academic career, Parker Palmer experienced major misgivings. Abruptly resigning his position, he spent the next six years at Pendle Hill, an obscure Quaker commune near Philadelphia. Scandalized, his family and friends confronted him: “Why did you get a Ph.D. if this is what you are going to do? Aren’t you squandering your opportunities and gifts,” they asked him? Eventually, Palmer sank into

a deep clinical depression where, he writes, “I was left with nothing but the reality of my own fear.”

But eventually the long unproductive period and accompanying depression proved invaluable. It forced Parker Palmer to accept that temperamentally he simply was not suited for academic teaching and research. “The truth is,” he writes,

I had fled because I was afraid—afraid that I could never succeed as a scholar, afraid that I could never measure up to the university’s standards for research and publication. And I was right, though it took me many years to admit that to myself.... Fortuitously, my *fear* of failing as a scholar contained the energy I needed to catapult myself out of the academy and free myself for another kind of educational mission....

According to Mark Ian Barasch, an expert on holistic healing, “To really live, you must die to your preconceptions.” That appears to be what happened to Parker Palmer during his depression and to Ram Dass with his paralysis. When the bottom falls out, the opportunity arises to think very differently about our lives and to begin growing in new directions.

Now, it would be foolish to argue that every failure and misfortune heralds a major transformation or positive personal development. Sometimes the changes are much more prosaic. As he was succumbing to pancreatic cancer, British playwright Dennis Potter expressed surprise at the difference it had made in his daily outlook:

The fact is that you can see the present tense—boy, do you see it! And boy, can you celebrate it!

In this case, serious illness had the effect of concentrating the individual’s attention, opening a bit wider the doors of perception so that what had always been ordinary became extraordinary.

In other instances, a negative life experience awakens in us humility, acceptance, and awe. It is a relief to know that we don’t have to be in command all the time, or to maintain an aura of invincibility. We can relax into imperfection, and experience for once our full humanity. This, too, is a silver lining of a sort.

Having studied this propensity for quite some time, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert is convinced that human beings possess what he calls a “psychological immune system.” In the same manner as the brain begins producing dopamine and

other pain-numbing chemicals when we severely injure ourselves, it also conjures explanations and alternative scenarios when unpleasant events threaten to engulf us emotionally.

Gilbert's findings are intriguing. It appears, for instance, that the psychological immune system isn't activated by small disappointments, only by major life traumas. "Intense suffering," he says, "triggers the very processes that eradicate it."

It is also an autonomic process whose benefits disappear when one tries consciously to control it. Silver linings must be perceived as spontaneous insights, not as carefully deliberated rationalizations for misfortune. According to Gilbert when something really bad happens, our brains immediately begin shopping around for a less dreadful view. And the unconscious mind, he says, "is one smart shopper" who needs no assistance from the ego.

Finally, Professor Gilbert argues that it is only when the individual is really stuck, and feels helpless to improve their situation, that the psychological immune system goes on a shopping spree.

It is only when we cannot *change* the experience that we look for ways to change our *view* of the experience.... We find silver linings only when we must....

Does Daniel Gilbert's explanation of *how* the process works diminish the value of silver linings? Does it make them somehow less valid? I think not. The psychological immune system is a critical sur-

vival mechanism that restores hope and keeps us upright. The re-framing that it stimulates is an important part of the process of recovery from trauma. The amazing thing is that sometimes we not only *recover*, our lives are enriched and occasionally redeemed by the experience.

The ultimate value of silver linings is captured by the poet Wallace Stevens: "After the final *no*," he writes, "there comes a *yes*, and on that *yes* our future ultimately depends."

In concluding, I'd like to give credit to Lorna Aaronson for inspiring today's service. Last summer, after 100 mph winds took down a number of trees in the Tenney Park area, damaging a neighbor's house and leaving a mess in the park, she shared these thoughts by e-mail:

I have been so impressed with my neighbor's resilience, optimism, curiosity, and sense of humor, even as she deals with insurance adjusters, getting bids from contractors, appreciating the skills of the tree removal company, arborist ... contacting friends who rescued the manageable limbs for firewood and possibly even furniture. And we're beginning to plan how to plant the newly freed space and at the same time that I regret the loss of two old trees, I am appreciating my new, open view of the lake.

Lorna wondered whether her experience contained the germ of a sermon. The answer should now be obvious.