

Empowering the Human Spirit

–The Grand Secret of Growing Through Adversity Revealed

By Doug Kelley, CSL • February 2001
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HAVE you ever sat in a busy place, and just watched people? People are certainly interesting, and by watching them, you can get a better sense of the human condition. Regardless of the issues that separate people, one thing remains—we *are all human beings*. If you take the time to really look into people's eyes, you will behold a disturbing reality: that at some point in life, each one of us have been in the very clutches of despair; cut to the heart with pain; tears streaming down our face; and unsure of the right path to take. Lurking deep inside of each one of us are our uncertainties; our fears; our pain. Try as we do to hide it, no one is exempt.

Several years ago while facing a very difficult situation, my dad gave me some sage advice that can only come from someone who has been there and done that; someone who has looked adversity square in the eye and overcome it. As I waited with bated breath, he bestowed his grand wisdom upon me. With a deliberate and slightly cheerful tone of voice, he said, “Don’t worry son, the first hundred years are the hardest.” I laughed at what he said, but the real tragedy of those words began to come through. The truth is that each one of us must face day-to-day disappointments and failings, and unforeseen happenings. Furthermore, we have all made our fair share of mistakes and blunders.

What a shame it is that for many, many people, the first hundred years *are* the hardest. But I ask, “Why does it have to be this way?” Well, guess what? It doesn’t have to be this way! We do not have to settle for or surrender to a life of intense hardship!

DEFINING ADVERSITY AND EMPOWERMENT

How do we take a firm stand against adversity and find empowerment? First, we must understand exactly what adversity and empowerment are. Adversity occurs when something in our lives is in a state of disorder. Empowerment results when “that something” is restored to a state of order. Lack of order robs us of precious energy and emotional strength. The more that is out of order in our life, the less power we have. Stated another way, adversity is the by-product of a chaotic situation. It is the anguish and frustration we feel. When the situation is restored to its proper order, the adversity gives way to empowerment.

To illustrate, what is the first thing you do when you walk into a dark room? Turn on the light, right? When you flip on the light switch, you are empowering the light to shine, and when a light bulb is shining, it is in order. Conversely, when a light bulb is not shining, or is burned out, it is in disorder. Why? Because the purpose of a light bulb is to shine and illuminate a room. So when a light bulb is not shining, it is not fulfilling its purpose.

Now if I ever so slowly dim the lights—just a little bit—over an extended period of time, you will probably not notice until one day you say, “this room is just not as bright as it used to be.” But when you look at the light bulb and see that it is still burning, you might conclude that *it* is not the problem and look elsewhere, only to fail in finding a long-term solution.

We are a lot like that light bulb. Life's challenges have a way of dimming our spirit at times. When life becomes disordered in some way, our “light” starts to dim. Moreover, if the adversity (or disorder) goes on too long without relief, we can even burn out. Certainly, at times adversity can hit us all at

once. But many times, one little adversity piles on another until one day we say, “I just don’t have the power I used to have.”

Just like a light bulb, we too have a purpose in life to fulfill—to shine on the world in some unique way. However, when we face adversity, that is, when something (or several things) in our life is in a state of disorder, our spirit grows dim and we lose our power. It’s like walking into a dark room, but not being able to find the light switch.

HOW TO FIND THE "LIGHT SWITCH"—THE GRAND SECRET REVEALED

Now that we know the true nature of adversity and empowerment, what do we do about it? Unfortunately, since adversity comes in all shapes and sizes, there is no single cure-all. Each situation will require a different and unique solution. There are, however, a couple of mindsets that will help us to view adversity properly, which means we will be much better equipped to find a solution.

1) Having a Proper Attitude Toward Adversity. It has been well stated that “it is not what happens to us that matters, but rather, how we *react* to what happens to us.” Further, we must understand this crucial point: *Our problems have no life of their own. The only life they have is the life that we give to them!* Thomas A’Kempis, a 13th century monk, made an interesting observation. Adjusted for Modern English, he wrote, “What hurt could it do you if you would just let it pass and make no account of it? Could it even so much as pluck one hair from your head?”

That’s a good question. Are our troubles so bad that they could yank even one hair from our head? Likely not. While possible, rare it is that our troubles are so bad that we will be injured or die from them. We probably won’t be tortured, imprisoned or burned at the stake for them either. It becomes clear then—we really need to bring our troubles into perspective. After all, *how bad can it be?* Do our problems really matter that much in the Grand Scheme of things? When we are consumed with our own troubles, consciously or not, we believe that our problems are somehow the most important in the universe. The truth is that they are not. Even though our problems may be the most important ones *to us*, the fact remains that no matter how we slice it, there will always be somebody with worse problems than ours.

2) Learning the Lessons in the Adversity. In his book, *As A Man Thinketh*, John Allen makes a very interesting observation. He very insightfully states, “man is where he is that he may learn that he may grow; and as he learns the spiritual lesson which any circumstance contains for him, it passes away and gives place to other circumstances.” How true! But if we do not learn from our trials in life, then of what value are they? This is the Grand Secret of growing through adversity, and among the greatest lessons we will ever learn in life.

USING ADVERSITY AS A GROWTH TOOL

Since adversity will continue to rear its ugly head now and then, we must never forget that there is a lesson to be learned in any adversity or difficult situation. Once we learn the lesson, the adversity passes. What is the lesson of your adversity? What would have to change for your adversity to pass?

This cannot be emphasized enough. If we are unhappy with where we are in life, we need to ponder the question, “What is the lesson here that I have not learned?” For example, if you don’t like your current financial situation, then what is the lesson you haven’t learned? What would have to change for a new and better financial situation to replace the current one? These same two questions can be applied to anything that is out of order in our life.

Consider another beneficial aspect to adversity. John Allen also wrote, "Circumstance does not make the man: it reveals him to himself." You see, adversity is not so much about contending with trouble as it is learning more about what is hidden inside of us; about who we really are. Adversity can bring out the best and the worst in us, our "true colors." Viewed properly, adversity engenders empathy and compassion in us for the human condition. This in turn inspires other virtuous qualities in us, which in turn can lead us to deliver greatness to the world in our own unique way.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THIS SECRET?

Now that you know the Grand Secret of growing through adversity, what will you do with it? Will you use it to turn adversity around to your advantage? By definition, adversity is not easy to deal with. Somehow, we must find and develop the inner strength to handle life's daily challenges in a positive manner. Paradoxically, this inner strength comes from adversity, and the lessons we learn from it.

There is no reason why the "first hundred years *have* to be the hardest." If you view adversity in the proper perspective and not give it more life than necessary; and, most importantly, if you learn the lesson contained in it, you are taking control of the adversity and not letting it control you.

So the next time your spirit is dark, and you can't find the "light switch," remember the Grand Secret of Adversity—learn the lesson contained therein. Once you do, you will see the adversity pass and you will grow from the experience. Keep doing this and you will illuminate the world with your own shining spirit!

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