

Facing Adversity and Embracing Change

When life hits you with a hard blow, do you let it knock you down for the count or do you pick yourself up, dust yourself off and embrace the change? Victim or survivor—which do you choose?

Sometimes we choose victim when we are first hit with adversity, but it is what we do next that counts. Do we stay in the victim consciousness and let life knock us down or do we move into the survivor consciousness where we can learn from the experience, accept the change and see the gift in the experience?

Creativity is a key to surviving adversity and embracing change. We can use our creativity to make the most of a situation or to make needed changes in order to continue forward.



In the movie *Life is Beautiful*, Guido and his five-year old son are arrested near the end of World War II and are sent along with other Jews to a prison camp. Guido's spiritual test is to be either a victim and succumb to fear or to be a survivor and use his creativity. Out of love for his son, Guido chooses to invent an adventure to protect his son from the horror of the camp and of their possible fate. The camp becomes a game where the prize is a real tank.

The rules constantly change, but they involve a lot of hide-and-seek, plenty of make-believe and something called "silence." The police act as they do because they are trying to win the tank. Anyone complaining about not having enough food is disqualified and has to go home. In doing this Guido manages to transform the ordeal into an adventure for his son.

Guido doesn't survive to the end of the war. His son, however, rides home in a tank. The one thing we all have in common is that we die. The goal isn't necessarily to survive at all costs. When we leave this world, how we lived our life and touched others is what we take with us and what we leave behind. Guido chose to be a survivor even though physically he didn't survive.

Victim or Survivor?

Sarah's dream in life was to have a family and be a mother. When Sarah married, she and her husband agreed that he would support the family financially and she would be a full-time mother to their children. As alcoholism took over her husband, despite having three children, he stopped paying the bills. Sarah took a part-time job to cover essential household bills. She struggled for a few years feeling miserable although she tried to make the best of it. She loved being a mother and more than anything she wanted to be with her children.

After spending a time feeling like a victim of her husband's alcoholism, she faced the situation and made a decision to follow her heart. With emotional support from friends, she quit her job and put her heart into raising her children. She decided she was willing to face the consequences of unpaid bills. After cold showers and cold food because the power had been cut off, her husband started paying the bills.¹

Life presented Sarah with an unwelcome change—her husband's alcoholism. Sarah chose first to be a victim of this change as she struggled to be both a mother and provide income to support her family. Moving from a victim to a survivor, she chose to live her dream and trust

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life. Even though this meant going through a difficult period with no electricity or gas, she made the most of it. In doing this, she allowed her husband the freedom to choose whether he would be a victim or a survivor.

In 1995, a horseback-riding injury left actor Christopher Reeve a quadriplegic—the most severe degree of paralysis. Reeve lived for nine years after his accident. During those years he worked tirelessly to regain movement with the goal to eventually walk again. “In 2002, Reeve stunned the medical world with the news that he had regained some sensation over 70% of his body and could move most of his joints underwater.”

Reeve said in an interview in 2002: “I try to go about this with as much dignity as I can, but not a day goes by when I don't make some effort to get out of this situation.”² Reeve was a survivor. His perseverance and can do attitude was an inspiration to many.

Many of us grow up believing that life just happens to us. Could it be that every experience, both welcome and unwelcome, is created just for us? If so, why the need for hardships? Perhaps they hone our survival skills. Perhaps they teach us to grow spiritually, to understand more about who we are and why we are here. Perhaps they teach us skills and attitudes we need in order to create our dreams.

Building Survival Skills

A school counselor in Maine, concerned about an unruly class of fifth graders, wondered how to deal with the situation. The usual methods of discipline obviously weren't working. He used his creativity to give the kids a fresh focus—from misbehaving to helping others. Each student was given an assignment to perform 33 good deeds during the year. "The kids took to the idea with surprising enthusiasm and, one by one, the deeds piled up: visiting a nursing home, organizing a penny drive for the local animal shelter, shoveling snow for a neighbor, taking notes for a sick classmate ... each day the kids traded stories." Each student reached their goal and chose to continue. "Nowadays it isn't the kids, but the kindness, that's out of control..."³

The school counselor, when faced with adversity, chose to use his creativity in a positive way that brought love into the class. In turn, the children learned of the happiness and love they can feel when helping another or being of service.

Meir Schneider is a health practitioner who is inspiring those who have been faced with extreme adversity. He coaches paraplegics, quadriplegics and those seriously injured in accidents to learn to move from being a victim to being a survivor. Most of his clients have given up hope. He teaches them to move beyond the limitations that life has given them.

"Health has to do with getting beyond our feelings of fear, guilt and lack..." says Schneider. "Fear is the wrong tool for healing. We have to have enough self-value to spend the time it takes to work on ourselves. Eighty-five percent of the things we are told we can't overcome, we can."

Melissa, one of Schneider's patients, had undergone 29 surgeries to restore her crushed face and injured brain after being run over by a sports utility vehicle. She remained in pain, was nearly blind and terribly conscious of her disfigured face. Working with Schneider she began to let go of her fear. She said, "For the first time in five years I felt that it was possible to have a life." When her vision and mental acuity started to return, Schneider threw her a curve when he told her to get herself a boyfriend. With her looks, she hadn't considered that a close relationship would be possible again. With his encouragement she opened herself to the possibility and let go of the limitation she had placed on herself. To do so she had to take her attention off her disfigurement and see herself as a loveable person. Before long she met an old friend. He wanted to protect her and kiss her injured face. They're getting married.⁴

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The day will come when, after harnessing the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love.

And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

Teilhard de Chardin,
Jesuit Priest & Scientist, 1881–1955

Melissa has experienced extreme adversity. With Schneider's help, she learned to love herself. And by doing this, she was able to open herself to the possibility that someone could love her. Melissa is a survivor.

Discovering the Gift

A poor villager in India had only two things in life that he loved. He had a 16-year old son and a handsome gray pony. One day the pony vanished. The villager was devastated. No one could cheer him up. Three days later the pony returned followed by a handsome black Arabian stallion. The villager was now overjoyed.

His son asked to ride the stallion. He did not want to deny his son the pleasure so he agreed. An hour later, the villager received news that his son had been thrown off the horse. He was carried home on a litter with his right leg shattered in two places. The villager was distraught and cried.

Within a short time a contingent of the king's soldiers rode into the village. They dragged off all the young men as war was imminent. Because of his injured leg, the villager's son was left behind. The villager's tears turned to joy.⁵

When life hits us hard, often we feel beat up—like the villager, who first had his beloved pony run away and then his son's leg crushed. Sometimes in hindsight, the gift is obvious—the beautiful stallion and then the son saved from war. Other times the gifts are more subtle—learning to love ourselves, learning to solve problems with love or learning the joys of serving. These are some of the gifts Melissa learned with her disfigured face; the school counselor learned in solving his problem with unruly children; and the children learned in putting their attention on serving others.

When we move from feeling that life is something that happens to us to trusting that life brings experiences for us to learn, then we develop the ability to see the miracles in our life. Life often brings adversity so that something better can come into our lives.

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When we learn to move from being a victim as a result of adversity, to being a survivor as a result of embracing change, we discover hidden strengths.

When we live from our strengths, we lift those around us.

References

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