

What to Do When Your World Turns Upside Down

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August 4, 2019

The day will come when your world turns upside down. One minute the universe is revolving smoothly on its accustomed grooves, and the next it jumps completely off the tracks. The phone rings late at night and a voice says there's been an accident. The routine physical turns up an unexpected cancer. Our spouse tells us that he or she wants out of the marriage. There are hundreds of ways for the carefully constructed worlds we inhabit to fly utterly to pieces.

"There is only one question which really matters," writes Rabbi Harold Kushner. "Why do bad things happen to good people? All other theological conversation is intellectually diverting, somewhat like doing the crossword puzzle in the Sunday paper and feeling very satisfied when you have made the words fit, but ultimately without the capacity to reach people where they really care. Virtually every meaningful conversation I have ever had with people on the subject of God or religions has either started with this question or gotten around to it before long."

The Gallup poll conducted a survey a few years back. One of the questions asked people in congregations what sermons they would find most helpful. At the top of the list, people asked for sermons about how to put their faith into practice. Right below that, they asked for sermons on death and dying. The results weren't too surprising. People naturally turn to spiritual traditions for guidance in how to respond to suffering and loss. They turn to religion for strength in heartache. They want a faith that addresses life's greatest problems and that does so in a practical way.

As some of you know, I'm a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical responder. In the average week, my pager goes off a dozen times. A driver loses control and a vehicle flips on the highway. A resident takes a fall down the stairs, or slips in the tub. A young woman has cut herself and is considering suicide. A house fire destroys a

family's priceless possessions. The CPR doesn't work. Often I'd like to offer a hug, or words of comfort, but that's not my role. Yet I'm keenly aware how any day, the red trucks and flashing lights might be coming to my house, or my neighbor's. No one is invulnerable. Bad things happen.

Yet the question remains, Why? In fact, every religion in the world has to wrestle with the same riddle. There are some good answers, but none that are completely satisfying.

Some answer by saying that evil and sickness and death don't really exist. Bad things are just illusions. God is good and the universe is just, and when life appears otherwise, it must be the result of our own bad thinking and incorrect perceptions. This was the attitude of Socrates, who said that 'nothing evil can befall a good man, life or in death.' It's an outlook shared by modern Christian Scientists and many New Age philosophers. In many ways it's a healthy perspective, since it encourages us to keep our vision focused on the flowers and not the weeds. It invites us to think positively and remain the master of our own reactions whatever slings and arrows fall our way. In other respects, however, this is an incomplete answer. Loss and pain aren't fictional. Life is not always fair. Babies get born without a heart. Kindergarteners get shot by guys with AK-15s. However much we might wish it otherwise, tragedy is part of our experience.

Why do bad things happen? Another answer is that bad things have a way of working for the good. Facing challenges and hardships make us stronger individuals. Experiencing pain makes us more sensitive and caring for the pain of others. If we could only see it, everything has a lesson to teach. As Alexander Pope wrote,

All nature is but art, unknown to thee:
All chance, direction which thou canst not see:
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good.

This answer also has merit. We often do learn and grow by wrestling with adversity. Maturity and the school-of-hard-knocks do bring a kind of wisdom and emotional insight. But again, this answer is incomplete. Some suffering builds character, but sometimes it's effect is the opposite, as with kids who grow up in abusive homes, or soldiers returning from combat coping with PTSD. How can we say "it will all work out for the best" to the family member diagnosed with Alzheimer's? In real life, not every story has a happy ending.

Another answer to the question "Why do bad things happen?" is the belief in a system of future rewards. Christians believe in heaven, Hindus in karma. Through life seems unfair now, accounts will be squared later on. This answer also had some appeal. In this life, anyway, crime usually doesn't pay, lies have a way of catching up with you, and mischief-makers usually come to a bad end. It's equally true that virtue and integrity carry some built-in rewards: peace of mind, recognition from the community, the trust and confidence of friends. But whether or not a sweet hereafter really exists is a matter of faith, not knowledge. All we know for certain is that this world is not always just or equitable or even safe, as we saw in the last 24 hours with mass shootings in Dayton and El Paso.

One of the classic attempts to address the question of "Why bad things happen" is contained in the book of Job. Job recounts the story of a man whose world has turned upside down. The tale begins with chapters one and two. These chapters are written in prose and tell how an upright man in the land of Uz became the object of a wager between God and Satan. God permits Satan to test Job by taking away everything he has - his wealth, his family and finally his own health - in order to measure the depth of Job's loyalty to God. The final chapter of the book is also in prose and forms the conclusion of this morality tale. After being tested and found worthy, Job is restored to his former condition. He is given new cattle and oxen, more sons and daughters, all in double measure to what he had before. This prologue and epilogue form one story of Job. The point is the conventional one that goodness will be rewarded in the end.

“Patient as Job” and “longsuffering as Job” are phrases which have entered our language to convey this theological message. Don’t complain. Have trust. Sooner or later, you’re bound to receive your due.

The second story of Job is contained in the central portion of the book. These thirty-nine chapters are in poetry rather than prose, suggesting they came from a different author than the one who wrote the preface and postscript. The Job portrayed here is not patient, not longsuffering, not uncomplaining. Just the opposite. This is a man who knows he’s been wronged. He’s outraged and angry and demands the Heavens give some accounting or explanation of all the trouble that’s befallen him. “I would speak to the Almighty,” Job exclaims, and I desire to argue my case with God.”

Onto this scene come Job’s three well-meaning but bumbling friends. What do you say to a man who’s lost his home, his livelihood, whose wife and kids have died, who’s covered with boils and sitting on an ash heap, scraping his sores with a broken pot? “I know just how you feel” doesn’t seem right. “It is hard to know what to say to a person who has been struck by tragedy,” affirms Harold Kushner, “but it’s easier to know what not to say. Anything critical of the mourner (‘don’t take it so hard,’ ‘try to hold back your tears, you’re upsetting people’) is wrong. Anything that tries to minimize the mourner’s pain (‘it’s probably for the best,’ ‘it could be a lot worse,’ ‘she’s in a better place now’) is likely to be misguided and unappreciated. Anything which asks the mourner to disguise or reject his or her feelings (‘we have no right to question God,’ ‘God must love you to have selected you for this burden,’) is wrong as well.” Job’s friends make all these mistakes and more. They’re of small comfort to a man who needs compassion more than criticism or advice, and who needs someone to hold him rather than scold him.

One of our incurably human tendencies in the face of tragedy is to blame the victim. The woman who’s been raped must have done something to provoke her attacker. Or, for years, doctors told us ulcers were caused by worrying or the wrong temperament or personality type, as if the sufferer brought this affliction upon himself, until scientists discovered most ulcers were a result not of bad thinking but of bad bacteria in the gut.

Blaming the victim is a form of psychic self-defense. We reassure ourselves that we're different and hence safe from the misfortune that affects others. Job reflects that before his troubles began, "men listened to me, and waited, and kept silence for my counsel ... And now I have become their song, I am a byword to them. They abhor me, they keep aloof from me. But while Job becomes an outcaste and untouchable among his neighbors, blamed for his own problems, he continues to protest his innocence before God.

And Job gets his wish! For "then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.'" This is a line I love. God isn't the one who provides the answers. The transforming, life-giving mystery behind the world is the one who asks the questions. And the questions God asks are questions of meaning, of our individual place and purpose in the cosmos. For in a vision, God shows Job the vastness of time and space, the constellations and planets, the oceans and the earth with its myriad of living creatures. "Do you know who set the Pleiades in the sky, or the great bear and his brother, who said to the crashing waves thus far shalt thou come and no farther? Tell me, if you have understanding."

It took me a long time to grasp this ending to the book of Job, because God never really responds to Job's grievances or request for logical explanations. God certainly doesn't apologize. Yet Job sits down in the dust chastened, repenting (which literally means turning around, or taking a new direction.) "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear," Job says to God in the final section of the book, "but now my eye sees thee." He's had a perceptual shift, a paradigm change, a conversion experience. Because the power behind life is not ultimately logical or orderly or designed for our convenience; it's wild and untamed and roaring. And the faith we live by, that gets us through the sad times and the bad times and mad times is also non-rational, non-linear, non-analytical. We don't get it from books, or Sunday School lessons, or even TED talks. Where we get it is from someplace beyond words, inexplicable, an act of grace.

So what can you do when your world turns upside down? There are several things we can learn from the book of Job.

One, don't blame yourself or be hard on yourself. Don't allow yourself to be poisoned with guilt or self-reproach. Although his so-called friends try to convince Job that he must be responsible for his own problems, Job maintains a strong sense of his own worth. He knows there are some elements in his situation that are his responsibility, but others that are beyond his personal control. When you're down on your luck, try not to get down on yourself.

Two, let your pain be pain. Because sometimes we need to cry. We have to weep and do the hard work of grieving. Job doesn't try to deny or minimize his suffering. He doesn't mask his anguish. When I was studying for ministry, I had to do a hospital chaplaincy. Our instructor warned us: one night we might walk into a room where a man had just died and his wife would be wailing, shaking, sobbing. The doctors would say "Give this woman a shot, she's hysterical." But it was our job as pastors to tell the doctors she didn't need a shot. She needed a shoulder to cry on, a hug, a listening ear, someone to just be present to her pain.

On this note, presidential candidate Marianne Williamson talks a lot about our society's tendency to medicalize and pathologize normal human suffering. As she says, "The 20s can be very hard. They're not a mental illness. Divorce can be very difficult, losing a loved one, someone that you know died, someone left in a relationship and you're heartbroken, that's very painful, but it's not a mental illness. You had a professional failure, you lost your job, you went bankrupt. Those things are very difficult, but they're not a mental illness." Up until a few years the American Psychiatric Association didn't diagnose people who'd suffered a major loss as clinically ill, or in need of medical treatment. They made an exception for widows and widowers experiencing normal grief. But then they changed that protocol. Everyone needs drugs, psychopharmacology. Now Let me be clear. I'm not against anti-depressants and therapy can help. But they're not a cure all. And you shouldn't be made to feel

abnormal or a failure or sick in the head if you're depressed. You have a right to feel blue. And in mourning, there's no way out but through. You have to endure the sorrow to reach tomorrow.

And this brings me to the last point, three. Open yourself to change. Job is finally answered by God, but not in the way he expected. He's restored, but not in the way he anticipated. He finds a new normal. When our world turns upside down, our first instinct is to restore that lost world. It's like the little girl who dies whose the parents never change the room; every teddy bear and pink lace curtain remains the same, a curated museum as if that could bring her back. But it doesn't work that way. Switching metaphors (really switching), life is like riding a motorcycle. On a bike, there's no reverse gear--you can't go back--and if you're not moving forward, you fall over. The only way to manage the bumps is to stay loose in the saddle and the only way to keep from running off the road is by leaning into the curves. Believe me, because I've taken some spills myself.

So is there an answer to the question why bad things happen to good people? "That depends on what we mean by 'answer,'" concludes Harold Kushner. "If we mean 'is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?' - why is there cancer in the world? Why did the plane crash? Why did my child die? - then there probably is no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there."

"But the word 'answer' and mean 'response' as well as 'explanation,' and in that sense, there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. The response would be Job's response ... to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to people around us, and to go on living despite it all."