

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF HARD TIMES

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Not that any of us needs any help recognizing what a hard patch of economic ground we're traversing together these days, but this reality was brought home to me recently in a quirky yet illuminating, way. I had two press interviews this week. Nothing particularly quirky about that. Having conspicuously outlived myself, I've become a resident expert on death, armed with a quiver full of sound bites in response to such questions as, "What is it like being almost dead?"

I actually enjoy these encounters. First, I am happy to be on the other end of the line. And, second, death is one of the last remaining taboos. I keep in practice as your minister of public theology by breaking it.

Well, here's the deal. The two journalists who called me this week didn't care a flying fig about my death. All they wanted to talk about was the economy.

Here's what I found illuminating about these two long conversations. Though fashioned to hit a different target, many of the arrows in my quiver served me equally well in discussing the economic crisis. How can we deal with loss, anxiety, or dread? Is there anything we can do to loosen fear's grip on our souls? When our world turns upside down, how do we get back on our feet? How can we cope with a sudden, unexpected reversal of fortune? Can anything good come out of something so patently and palpably bad?

If I'm not mistaken, the first time I shared with you the Chinese ideogram for the word, crisis—it combines two word pictures, one representing danger, the other representing opportunity—was the night after 9/11. I remember that remarkable evening so clearly. When the World Trade Towers, those mighty, seemingly indestructible symbols of American financial power, were reduced to a cloud of dust by a handful of terrorists, drawn by word of mouth and our aching need almost a thousand of us gathered in this sanctuary to light candles for the dead and begin working through our feelings of grief, loss and anger. The three do go together it seems (anger, loss, and grief) when something wholly unexpected

and unacceptable disrupts the pattern of our workaday lives. Anything that throws a shadow over our future threatens to cast us into the abyss.

Anger can even trump grief, perhaps because it's an active, not a passive emotion. "We will hunt you down," one outraged citizen threatened AIG executives on their web site. "We will hunt your children. . . . Give back the bonuses or kill yourselves." AIG received hundreds of violent messages. One man—I trust it was a man—wrote: "All the executives and their families should be executed with piano wire around their necks—my greatest hope." Rarely have I encountered such widespread and raw anger expressed at an entire class of our fellow citizens. Wall Street bankers, so recently the poster children for American prosperity, masters of the universe who if sufficiently unfettered could drive the free market engine ever higher toward the top of candy mountain, have been totally demonized, often by the very people who powered that engine with their trickle down ideology and disdain for government regulation. Never mind that tens of thousands of hard workers who had little or nothing to say about the amoral and devastatingly wrong-headed decisions being made at the top in some executive aerie are being tarred by the same poison brush.

Ever since Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent, we humans have been honing our finger pointing skills. When the roof caves in, the need to blame others, even to reduce them to a sub-human state, is apparently bred in the human bone. In this case, the refusal to acknowledge how much all of us have bought into the materialistic value system that our servants on Wall Street have helped fashion—the refusal to share any responsibility for the house of cards we cheered as it was being built and now damn as an act of corporate greed as it comes crashing down—epitomizes the buck stops elsewhere attitude that festers in the marrow of what might still best be called "original sin." Martin Luther put it this way: "The ultimate human sin is our unwillingness to concede that we are sinners." And the clear-eyed Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr described our penchant for adjudging ourselves innocent because our enemies were evil as "the secret of the relationship between cruelty and self-righteousness."

Mind you, I carry no truck for a system that is still, as we learned yesterday, paying partners 39 million dollar bribes in exchange for not selling any more than 10 percent of their stock over the next three years. One good thing that will come of this crisis I expect, though it should be inspired by common sense and a regard for the commonweal, not by a lust for vengeance, is that we will witness fewer of the egregious payouts that as recently as seven months ago

occasioned little more than envy among the very people today who are riding the high horse of moral principle.

Enough of that. Let me bring this crisis and what it is doing to our souls and spirits closer to home. Everyone in this room has been hurt, in one way or another, by the economic meltdown. Some of you are balanced on the precipice of financial ruin. And anyone among us with a 401 (K) or IRA we've prudently been investing in year after year has lost up to half of his or her savings, shaking the foundations of the future and ripping apart long-standing expectations for retirement. Some of you have lost or deeply fear losing your jobs. Others, who perhaps leveraged your future in the bubble as if it could only grow and never pop, find yourselves suddenly staggering under the weight of a debt you have no way to pay off.

But you know all this. What you may not know is that, almost independent of the level of difficulty in which you find yourselves right now, some of you are negotiating a passage that will, in some significant way, prove redemptive. Others of you will only be diminished by this crisis. You will emerge once it is over more heavily armored, less trustful, more cynical, and blocked off from almost every passageway that might have led through the thicket toward the light. After three decades as your minister, I have witnessed both outcomes more often than I can number.

The word crisis possesses another illuminating meaning. In Greek drama, the crisis is not some outside event that brings the hero down. The moment of crisis is instead the moment of decision. What happens to us doesn't drive the plot toward tragedy or to an uplifting resolution. It is how we respond that drives our plot and seals our outcomes. How we respond either saves us or leaves us languishing among the damned.

One thing a crisis almost always does is force us to change. We will either change for the better or for the worse. Facing new limitations on your life style, one of you will pine away in a house of ruin; the woman sitting right next to you in the pew may be rocked by the same circumstances to change her priorities and find meaning that before was hidden behind all the gloss and glitter. One will drown her sorrows in drink, another chose this moment to stop drinking and look back on it as the most significant, life-changing moment of his life. One, mortified by embarrassment will isolate himself, cut his remaining lifelines and languish. Another will recognize her own tears in another's eyes, reach out and connect. One woman, shaken from her accustomed routine by events she can only regret will nonetheless find herself liberated from the rut she had been running

in. Once she finds her footing, having always played it safe, she will begin to take risks she never before would have contemplated. Having sleepwalked through her recent life, she will awaken to old dreams or new possibilities. Why? Because a glass of cold water was thrown in her face, as it has been thrown in all our faces. The same glass of cold water will leave some of you feeling insulted and victimized; others it will awaken and ultimately refresh. Most poignantly perhaps, some of you will take your fears and fashion them into a weapon to be employed against the only people whom you still have power over—your loved ones. Others will transmute their suffering into empathy. You will feel other people's pain because it so resembles your own. And, escaping the bonds of self-absorption, you will reach out and lend a helpful heart to advance our common cause.

All of this is difficult, of course. It's difficult for everyone, even for those of you who will emerge from this crisis reborn. Change is difficult. It cannot help but raise the temperature of our lives. It cannot help but foster fear. Anxiety and dread arise from the feeling of not being in control of the many frightening things that might befall us.

All I can suggest to you is this. Don't fight your fears. Outwit them instead. Turn your mirror into a window. Look out, not in. You see, the more we obsess on them, in fact through our very attempts to control them, dread and anxiety take their purchase on our souls. Home becomes a moated castle, and the castle, soon, a prison tower. Life is reduced to a grim business, our forays into the future at once manipulative and guarded. Fearing every transition from certainty to uncertainty, we devote our full energy to protecting ourselves against loss. The more we fear, the more frightening life turns out to be.

By the way, to escape the grip of self-imposed agony, you may need outside assistance. Don't think of this as weakness or as a crutch. When we fall, it takes more courage to ask for another's hand than it does to attempt lifting ourselves up by broken bootstraps.

To keep fear from establishing permanent residency in the habitation of your heart, three practical ideals commend themselves. I've mentioned them many times, for they've eased me through my own trials. And each lies fully within your power. They are to: want what you have; do what you can; and be who you are.

These three stratagems can help us reclaim our lives from fear's dominion. Wanting what you have mutes the pangs of desire, which

visits from the future to cast a shadow on the present. Doing what you can occupies your mind on that which is possible, no more and no less, thereby filling the present with conscious, practical endeavor. And being who you are entails refusing the fools gold of self-illusion. It requires and therefore fosters integrity, which above all other qualities makes us invulnerable to fear's destructive power.

One witness to unexpected hints of light illuminating the shadows of life is the poet Katherine Raine. In her poem "Exile," she writes:

Sometimes from far away

They sign to me;
A violet smiles from the dim verge of darkness,
A raindrop lands beckoning on the eaves,
And once, in long wet grass,
A young bird looked at me.
Their being is lovely, is love;
And if my love could cross the desert self
That lies between all that I am and all that is,
They would forgive and bless.

A theological point arises here. The surest way to discover the sacred is to decode our own experience, not only of beauty ("Heaven in a wildflower" say) but also in sacraments of pain by which we commune with each other. We all suffer. We are all broken at times and therefore in need of healing. We struggle to accept ourselves and forgive others. All of us do. Yet, at our best, we empathize with each other's pain and rise together in answer to a the law of love. Illumination shines from heart to heart.

Perhaps it's high time to lift our eyes from the stock ticker up toward the heavens. Time to remember how fragile life is and how precious love must therefore be. Time to seize every opportunity we are given to offer thanks, to celebrate, to serve, hope and love. Perhaps—and the good news is, Easter is only two weeks away—it's time to wander back once again to Calvary for our annual visit. Nothing is there now. No crosses. No crowd. We stand alone, looking beyond a naked hill to an endless desert. You and I together, each of us alone, looking out on eternity, measuring time. We look into forever and we weep.

And then we look back. How amazing it was! Wasn't it amazing? The people who loved us. The people who tried. Our parents, they weren't perfect no, but neither are we. Our children, if we are blessed to have children. Our friends, the sun and moon, touch and

sight, taste, hearing, smell, every miracle we take for granted. How amazing it is, life before death. Look back and mourn. Then look back and sing. Remember how profoundly we are blessed. Then we too can be resurrected—removed from our death supports.

In the Greek Orthodox Church, out of the cool darkness of an early spring evening, the celebration of Easter begins with the blessing of new fire. Struck from flint, this new fire passes from one candle to another until the church is filled with light. Trappist monk and modern mystic Thomas Merton describes how, long ago on Easter night, Russian peasants would carry the new fire home, back to their cottages. “The light would scatter and travel in all directions through the darkness, and the desolation of the night would be pierced and dispelled as lamps came on in the windows of the farmhouses one by one,” Merton writes. Emerging from the darkness out of deathly shadows, new fire is kindled from candle to candle, lighting home after home. “Even darkness,” he observes, “even evil, even death, seen by the light of the sacramental fire. . . can contribute accidentally, but existentially, to the life, growth and liberty of our souls. And [in] the night, then: the night of inertia, anguish and ignorance . . . is the passage through non-being into being, the recovery of existence from non-existence, the resurrection of life out of death.”

To practice spreading light in the darkness does not mean extinguishing the darkness. This we cannot do. But we can—if liberated from fear’s grip—see that shadows are only the action of light being cast. By catching but a glimmer of the powering light, we can both feel and see strange beauty. We emerge from our waking dream of death or destruction to live life more abundantly. And as our eyes grow accustomed, we may discover one more thing: We can see in the dark.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.