

## Challenges, Adversity and Tragedies Can Be Transformative Teachers

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*A setback is a setup for a comeback*  
 - Willie Jolley

I am astounded when I look back on my life and see how many times I've found a negative experience turn into a positive one. I've come to wonder in a generic way what messages or lessons I might discover in such types of occurrences.

Let me start with some examples. A very common one is when I have a health issue such as a cold, a muscle sprain or a minor abrasion wound. None of these is a serious problem, but each in its own way makes life sufficiently uncomfortable so that I truly wish I wasn't suffering the sniffles, the cough or the pains that make it hard to move comfortably through my daily routines.

1. Being a workaholic, a cold or the flu were often invitations for me to take a rest in my earlier years. It was not a rare occurrence when I had a vacation of a week or two that I came down with the sniffles and a mild fever near the start of the holiday. With the enforced bedrest I let go of all duties and chilled out.

2. Pain is a regular participant in these sorts of lessons. It is the way our unconscious mind gets our attention, much like sounding a strident telephone ring. And when we receive the message, the pain rapidly relents (Benor, 2009).

*Illness is the doctor to whom we pay most heed;  
 to kindness, to knowledge, we make promises only;  
 to pain we obey.*

- Marcel Proust

3. I recently sprained my back doing a yoga exercise. (To my surprise, I learned from others that yoga injuries are not an uncommon occurrence.) I've been practicing yoga for several years, and this had never happened before. It was hard to get out of bed and hard to move around. Listening to my pain, I heard that I was taking on too heavy a load of various projects. Even though I know about listening to my pain, this was a message I was reluctant to accept. And naturally, the pain did not relent until I made my peace with that message and put two of my newer projects on hold.

4. 'Terry' was a thirty-two year old woman who had suffered frequently from heartburn for the better part of a year. She was unable to identify items of food drink as a cause, despite diligent dietary

detective work. At a WHEE workshop she dialogued with her pain and was surprised to get the message that she was still grieving the loss of a boyfriend who had broken up with her shortly prior to the time the heartburn began. Her heartburn was actually being caused by her lingering heartache. And the blessing wrapped into this negative experience of pain continued to unfold. There was another positive message attached to this pain. Her inner self also invited her to clear another, long-buried heartache – the unresolved grief from the death of her father when she was twelve years old.

As she used WHEE to clear this grief, yet another layer, with a positive message emerged. Terry had had difficulties keeping boyfriends throughout her adult life. As she cleared her grief over the loss of her father, she came into the realization that the buried pain of the grief over her father's death had been attracting her to men who would not remain in a long-term relationship. In this manner, her inner self had been prompting and prodding her repeatedly to clear her grief over her father's death.

*It is only through pain that we change. It can be difficult to see our loved ones hurting but not changing. Our job is to love them. It is their pain that changes them, not our sermon.*

- Bernie Siegel

5. Barbara Sauve shared her personal report on her healing journey through negativity into positivity:

This journey began about four and a half years ago when I was about 57 years. I had lived most of my life as a painfully shy, vocally repressed child and adult. I NEVER sang, and only spoke up when I had no choice!!

One evening, the therapist that I was seeing was leading a group which I had attended many times before and really loved. It generally involved a writing exercise and I love to write. This particular night, only a few of us showed up for the group and the decision was made (not by me!!) that we would share songs. I just froze, and totally lost my voice. I couldn't sing, even to follow the songs that were being offered by others. My voice, as it always did when I felt threatened or uncomfortable, just retreated to a deep, inaccessible place inside of me. Even to try to say anything was painful and took a huge effort. This was a familiar experience and response, but being in this small group it felt even more intensified. I felt mortified and miserable – while everyone else was having a great time singing and dancing.

Within 10 days after this miserable experience, I found myself in a singing studio in front of a microphone and singing teacher. I was determined. I could not live with that kind of vocal repression anymore! And I had previously tried to free my voice in various sounding workshops but generally came home with my voice (and myself) even more strained and traumatized. But this time I was determined and fortunate to also have two therapists to help me through my vocal journey. The first singing teacher did get me singing but wasn't able to help me with the weakness and fear in my voice. So I went searching and found an amazing technique for the voice and a wonderful vocal coach who has helped me immeasurably in strengthening my voice, freeing the power in it. I'm now singing in front of friends and small groups. I'm doing storytelling. I'm leading small vocal workshops. I even have a few private clients that I am helping with their vocal issues and fears.

*The 'web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.'*

- Shakespeare

Similar, unexpected positives may unfold as the result of challenging experiences unrelated to health issues.

6. Laurie Huston reports on a challenge in her life that turned out to be transformative (Huston, web reference).

I believe I have understood a huge piece of the puzzle this past couple weeks. I've understood how when it comes to relationships, it is never about the other person (which at the time was a huge learning for me). This past month when something occurred that triggered my feelings of victimhood I was able to step out of the pain and fear and observe my reactions (after a few hours of pity, anger and fear). I was able to understand that something wasn't being done "to me," I had a choice how I could respond. Instead of being outraged and fearful, I came into a place of acceptance that although I didn't know *how*, I would be okay and this would be my choice. As I faced this situation where I felt the need to do something to change, fix and heal my situation, I instead came from a place of Being. I chose to come from a state of my core essence, not my reactionary state of fear about my future or a past pattern from my childhood. I chose to accept the situation and myself for who I was. I also chose to see how I use situations that "happen" in my life to play out an old scenario of pain and victimhood. I chose to grow from a place of love, instead of allowing my ego to react from fear.

I completely understood that you have to be in the Now moment, or present to acknowledge that you even have a choice. That if you are in your past patterns of sabotage and fear or worrying about the future, you only can react from your perceptions of fear. We all go through our own unique issues, based on our experiences. I saw, just like in relationships, where we think or believe that this is ALL about the other person, that there are always two people (like every situation has two or more sides). What we believe is about the other person, never is. It is our illusion of fear based on our experiences, conscious or unconscious, real or imagined that influences us to perceive the events as we do. We may also perceive events in our lives through our parent's judgments, hidden triggers from our past lives or our genetic lineage. Ultimately, we experience what our Soul wants us to experience which is in divine order. It is so much more complex than we imagined. And it's not about blame or accepting blame; it's about responsibility. But again not what you expect or imagine. Seeing our true responsibility is freeing, not restricting. It means we have power, and the ability to choose.

What I learned is that we truly can be in charge of how we respond. However, the important piece was that I had to be fully present. When I was in rage and fear, I was mostly reacting from my past patterns and worrying about my future. To be fully "in charge" I had to step into my power, see my reactions for what they were and accept that I had a choice. An empowered choice to not be bullied or taken advantage of, to do what I felt was right (my perception of what I felt was right for me, which may or may not have been from ego) and choose to respond from a place of empowerment. It was completely freeing and I could see how many of my choices felt like they weren't choices but reaction from being a victim. It opened up infinite possibilities for me and allowed me to feel empowered as I made the choice instead of feeling guilt, shame or powerless.

It can be very difficult to SEE ourselves. We often get stuck in a pattern that IS our life, until we DECIDE, enough! When we make the decision that we want more or that we want something different, that is when we look through the window to get a glimpse of who we truly are. The more we open up and become curious about discovering the truth of us, that is when we begin to see that we have the power to choose something different – we have the power to create the most miraculous life.

May this empower you to see another side to your story.

The universe may offer us serious challenges in the physical world that at first appear to be negative but then turn out to be blessings in disguise.

7. From the film, Apollo 13, which details the rescue of the astronauts whose lunar mission had to be aborted when an oxygen tank exploded in space, severely damaging their spacecraft:

**Jules Bergman** (a broadcast writer and journalist, Science Editor for ABC News): Apollo 13 commander, Jim Lovell, has more time in space, almost twenty-four days already, than any other man, and I asked him recently if he was ever scared.

**Jim Lovell:** I've had an engine flame out a few times in an aircraft, and was kind of curious as to whether or not it was going to light up again, things of that nature, but, uh, they seem to work out.

**Jules Bergman:** Is there a specific instance in an airplane emergency when you can recall fear?

**Jim Lovell:** Uh, well, I'll tell ya, I remember this one time - I'm in a Banshee at night in combat conditions, so there's no running lights on the carrier. It was the *Shangri-La*, and we were in the Sea of Japan... and my radar had jammed, and my homing signal was gone... because somebody in Japan was actually using the same frequency. And so it was - it was leading me away from where I was supposed to be. And I'm looking down at a big, black ocean, so I flip on my map light, and then suddenly: zap. Everything shorts out right there in my cockpit. All my instruments are gone. My lights are gone. And I can't even tell now what my altitude is. I know I'm running out of fuel, so I'm thinking about ditching in the ocean. And I, I look down there, and then in the darkness there's this uh, there's this green trail. It's like a long carpet that's just laid out right beneath me. And it was the algae, right? It was that phosphorescent stuff that gets churned up in the wake of a big ship. And it was - it was - it was leading me home. You know? If my cockpit lights hadn't shorted out, there's no way I'd ever been able to see that. So uh, you, uh, never know... what... what events are to transpire to get you home (Wikipedia web reference).

*If it weren't for the rocks in its bed, the stream would have no song.*

- Carl Perkins

These are some of the more common and obvious ways that negativity invites positivity in our everyday life experiences. As we waken to such teachings from the universe, they speak to us in ever more deep and complex ways.

### **Negativity promoting positivity in broad communities**

Single individuals have found inspirations to change the world, following negative experiences.

1. In 1893, Ghandi was thrown off a train in South Africa at the turn of the because of the color of his skin. This sparked his remarkable transformations of the status of Indians in South Africa and then in India, ultimately freeing India from British rule.
2. In 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused to obey a bus driver's order to she give up her seat to a white passenger. This sparked the bus boycott and gave Martin Luther King a platform to advance the cause of the civil rights movement.
3. In 2012 response to the tragic gang rape and death of a 23 year old woman in Delhi, thousands of people around the world have now taken action to stop violence against women in India and in other countries. On [Change.org](http://Change.org), more than 470,000 people signed Namita Bhandare's petition asking the Indian Government to take concrete steps to stop violence against women.

Thanks to public pressure:

- The Delhi Government set up fast track courts to address cases of sexual assault against women.
- The Indian Government set up the Justice Verma Commission to provide recommendations for speedier justice and punishment in sexual assault cases.
- The Chief Justice of India wrote to all High Courts advising them to set up fast track courts specifically for cases of violence against women. (CUPE web ref)

While public pressure has forced the Indian Government to take some direct steps related to this case, there is a vast need for further actions to protect women. People have already started other campaigns on Change.org to stop violence against women in India. These include initiatives such as

- Pressuring MTV India's facebook page to stop posting images of female body parts and asking users to guess who the model or actress is whose body is being commodified and denigrated.
- Installing additional street lights because dark alleys and streets are not safe for women.
- Promoting laws that will facilitate prosecution of Indian husbands (often with the collusion of the husband's family) who kill their wives with impunity, not only keeping their dowry but enabling the husbands to remarry for further dowries.

Women in many other countries are also becoming more vocal and active in taking steps to prevent rape and violence against women.

Broader social changes have evolved out of negativity. Throughout history, there have been numerous instances where oppressors stimulated the oppressed to rise up and create a more healthy and healing society. The French and American revolutions are well known examples.

### **Will accelerating global heating and other major adversities unite people to save our planet?**

*Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage.*

- William Ellery Channing

Our entire planet is facing the greatest challenge since the last major planetary catastrophe, which occurred 65 million years ago. At that time, the vast majority of species went extinct (Universe Today web ref). It is theorized from archeological evidence that a large meteor strike caused a sudden major climate change that wiped out most of the life forms existing at that time.

Over the past few decades, humanity has been causing the extinctions of millions of entire species. If humanity as a whole does not unite to address global heating ("warming" is an unacceptable euphemism!) and the problems causing climate change, we will suicide as a species. Sadly, we may also cause the extinctions of every other remaining organism on the planet. Other creative ways we might suicide include overpopulation, exhaustion of fresh water and food supplies, pollution and nuclear disasters.

Can these impending tragedies become our transformative teachers? Millions of people are exploring such possibilities. See for instance:

1. Transition Town Network, with municipal members around the world that are developing local initiatives for environmental and social changes to improve our planet and deal with global challenges of sustainability, pollution, healthcare and more (Transition Town web reference).

2. Wiser.org is a networking website listing over 110,000 member non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, governments, groups, and individuals addressing global issues such as climate change, poverty, the environment, peace, water, hunger, social justice, conservation, human rights, and more (wiser.org web reference).

3. Joanna Macy has developed an outstanding series of group exercises to help people identify, sort through and release their anxieties about serious impending challenges to the survival of our planet. Macy goes on to suggest similar exercises for exploring ways in which they can contribute to dealing with these threats (Macy, web references).

Hopefully, each of us individually and all of us collectively will rise to the challenges facing us today and will find ways to transcend our anxieties and to transform these potential tragedies into healing lessons.

*Where danger threatens, salvation also grows.*

- Friedrich Hölderlin

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