



Effects of Adversity, by Eranda Jayawickreme

Adversity may help people distinguish between events they can really control by changing their environment versus uncontrollable events. While they cannot change the environment in the latter case, they can control their response to them by accepting and adjusting their beliefs to fit with facts on the ground. Thus, on receiving a serious health diagnosis, I would respond positively by accepting the diagnosis and acknowledging that I have led a full life and would soon be going to a “better place.” Adversity may thus “humble” us in a way that is vital for our character growth, by educating us about the limits of the self, the limits of our control on the world, the weaknesses in our character, and the appropriate place of the self in the universe. In other words, adversity may free us from the tyranny of ego, by promoting a healthy sense of humility and helping us answer the question, “Why be good?” with the best response possible.

But we still don’t know everything about the effects of adversity. We don’t know, for example, what type and degree of adversity is “best” for our character, and it is important to be clear that some types of adversity provide few silver linings, if any. Not too long ago, Blackie and I traveled to a country with a terrible recent history of ethno-political conflict to talk with war survivors. During our travels, we heard heartbreaking stories of death, rape, injury, and loss. One young woman who remained positive and upbeat throughout our conversation had been severely wounded by gunfire. A second woman continued to search for her most likely dead son. A man of strong faith had no stable home apart from his visits to the treatment center we were visiting. We were stunned into silence, and as we drove off that evening, we asked ourselves, “Why be good when life is stacked against you?”

It may take a lifetime for these people to recover from such trauma, if ever. The fact that all of us will encounter tragedy at some point in our life does not necessarily mean that we should actively seek it out or be indifferent when suffering befalls others. And of course, we must do our utmost to protect people from severe suffering. But the people we met all had admirable faith, and some remained remarkably graceful and positive despite all they had suffered. The fact that these people were able to continue about their lives without succumbing to complete despair -- and even respond with forgiveness and grace -- is one of the greatest testaments to the human spirit and fundamental human goodness I can imagine.

