

Grow through crisis

Four steps to free yourself from despair



A heavy spring rain soaked the mountain for over a week before my daughter Sarah and I began our backpacking trip through the wilderness. The great Chattooga River that ran beside the hiking trail was swollen to the top of its banks, and we had to move carefully across the rocks to a special campsite on the other side.

As we approached the familiar spot where we had made camp many times before, Sarah called out from behind me.

“Something looks different here, Dad,” she said. “Be careful.”

Full of parental wisdom and authority, I said, “It looks fine to me. Let’s keep going.”

A few steps later my boots disappeared into an unseen pool of mud. As I struggled to free them, I quickly sank up to my waist in a bog created by all the rain. It was one of the most frightening experiences I’ve ever had. With my legs completely trapped and a heavy pack on my back, I was afraid that I would continue to sink deeper and deeper, unable to escape.

Have you ever had a moment like this? Even if you were not in the wilderness, have you felt trapped by a situation that threatened to overwhelm you? Your moment may have come with a frightening diagnosis or a late-night phone call telling you one of your children was in danger. In business, markets can shift, jobs can be eliminated, and people you trust can betray you. Any of these events can leave you awake in the middle of the night, feeling trapped, afraid and unsure of what to do.

When you’re mired in your own bog of despair, there are four steps to freedom.

Anchor your faith. My first reaction as I started to sink into the bog was to panic. I twisted and turned, trying to free my legs while my mind raced with every quicksand scene I’d ever watched on film. In the end, all I accomplished was to exhaust my energy and drive myself deeper into the mud. This is what you’re doing as you rush around taking every action you can think of and asking advice of everyone you know. Instead, stop your frantic search for answers long enough to center yourself in your faith and to hear your inner voice answer the question, “What is the right thing to do?”

Lighten your load. When I stopped my own thrashing that day, I instantly knew what to do. Slipping off my 40-pound backpack and heaving it past the bog stopped me from sinking any further and enabled me to begin to loosen my legs from the clinging mud. When a crisis hits, it’s time to let go of the things that are dragging you down. Whether it’s a job you hate or a relationship that is draining your spirit, now is the time to release it. Anger, bitterness and regret are also heavy burdens. Casting this dead weight aside may be the very act that sets you free.

Reach for help. As soon as she realized what had happened, Sarah grabbed a long limb that had fallen from a tree and extended it across the mud so I could reach it. As she anchored her end with all her might, I pulled on the branch and slowly began to feel my legs lifting free. It was a miraculous feeling that I remember vividly to this day.

No matter where you are, help is near. It may be through your family, through friends or even through the kindness of strangers. Perhaps it is your faith and connection to a higher power that sustains you. Whatever the source, the problem is not the absence of help, the problem is your willingness to reach out for it. Let go of your pride or your embarrassment or whatever is holding you back and take the first step to your answer: Ask for help.

Absorb the lesson. Every crisis offers a lesson. When you look back on your life, it will be the times of great challenge that you will value most. Learn to value them because these are the moments that will strengthen your faith, deepen your relationships and shape the person you will become.

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