Challenges That Change Us

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The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted a steady stream of negative emotions, impacting nearly every person on the planet. Yet we know that life is not without difficulty and a host of big, difficult emotions - emotions our primitive brains want to protect us from feeling.

Looking back, what challenges have helped you evolve into who you are today? Think about the curve balls life threw at you. The times life knocked you flat. When you felt the most shattered, deeply challenged, lacking strength and needing wisdom. When you were certain you could not go on. What lessons did you take from that? Would you agree that that particular challenge nudged you in the direction of who you were meant to be?

I think about those who have seen the front lines of war, witnessed terrible events or watched a spouse die. Those who have lived through poverty, hunger, trauma and abuse. Those who have lost a child. Those to whom life has dealt the toughest cards.

To me, what distinguishes the people who consider themselves victor rather than victim, is how they played the hand they were dealt.

They’re the people who come home from an unpopular war to a largely ungrateful country and simply tried to blend in and go to work.

They’re the people who have experienced trauma who put one foot in front of the other, accepting the one step forward, two steps back shuffle exactly as it is.

They’re the people who, at some point in their journey, chose to grow, not in spite of, but because of.

They’re the people who choose to help others who find themselves in the very same darkness.

Even if life hasn’t dealt you exactly those tough cards, no doubt you’ve had hardships, loss, mountains you’ve climbed and lessons you’ve learned. If we choose to, we grow more in the tough times than the easy ones. This is post traumatic *growth*, a theory that was developed in the mid-1990’s that explains transformation following trauma.

These are the lessons we can channel during subsequent tough times. “If I was able to do X, then I can do Y.”

We prefer comfort, of course. Our brains are designed to seek comfort since that is perceived as safety. But when we think about challenges big enough to change us, they are anything but comfortable. They serve up a host of big emotions, and it is our reaction to those emotions that determine what happens next, whether we grow.

It turns out that the price for growth is discomfort, and that’s where emotional courage comes into play. Any negative, uncomfortable emotion is just a sensation in our body. We can run, but we can’t hide. We can sweep it under the rug, but what we resist, persists. We can reach for the “escape” button, whether with overspending, overeating, excessive drinking, overwork, etc. but none of the above are a true escape. Whenever there are net negative consequences, in fact, we know that our “escape” button isn’t an escape at all.

The other option available to us is to be courageous enough to feel the feeling. Invite it in. Give it a name, describe exactly how it feels in the body, and just be with it. Because the worst that can happen is that we feel uncomfortable. The more we witness it, the more manageable it becomes. The better we can carry it, and in some cases, the faster it is completely resolved.

The pandemic of 2020 is a challenge that can change us, nudging us toward the person we are meant to be, offering us lessons for our growth. Or maybe it is just a miserable experience. The choice is ours, and therein lies our power.