

Are You Holding Yourself Back?

Many years ago, I was driving home in a blizzard from a meeting in New York City, on the winding Merritt Parkway. It was February, and the snowflakes were large and swirling, blowing at me in dense, unrelenting waves—the kind of snow that totally blinds, where you can't see in front of you, can't see the road, and can't see where you are headed. No other cars were around, no taillights to follow. My senses became heightened. I became acutely aware that I could easily head in the wrong direction, off the road, and crash, that something could suddenly emerge that could throw me off path, or that I could, in my blindness, steer the car into a ditch, into a tree, into a snowbank. Not unlike life.

As I drove in fear that evening, I drew upon a story my father loved telling about driving across the country and coming to a road that took him over the mountains into California. As the story goes, it was a narrow, winding road with no guardrails. He was driving inches from the edge, where one false move could send him crashing into the valley below. As he ascended the mountain, the drive and drop from the road grew increasingly ominous. He spoke of doubting and wanting to turn back. Then he saw a sign beside the road: "Thousands have driven this road, so can you."

To me, that story has always been about not being afraid to try, despite a lack of experience, knowledge, concern, fear, self-doubt, handicaps, obstacles, or whatever holds one back.

It was a story that was in my mind shortly after starting my consulting and counseling career, inexperienced and unprepared, really, just an immature and unaware kid.

Twenty-five years later I was evaluating a candidate for a foreign company that was seeking to hire a new general manager for its American business. I recognized the name of the candidate who was before me. He was an entrepreneur who had built and sold a company he had started, earning him more than \$25 million, if I recall correctly. "Why is he interested in this job?" I wondered. He told me how he invested all his money in internet stocks, and then the stock market crashed, and the companies he invested in folded. He was broke and needed a job.

The roads we are given to drive can become daunting, I thought. They can challenge the spirit, test our core.

I have interviewed many successful people who started out in life with little or nothing; living in poverty; no parents or other family to speak of; educational deficiency; racism; bullying; language barriers; a physical disability; living in a ghetto; drug addiction or being under the thumb of a totalitarian regime and then escaping and coming to America, not knowing the language, not

knowing anyone. If you have met such people, their stories are inspiring. They used the obstacles, difficulties, and handicaps they experienced to fortify their strength and determination. They had fear but were fearless in how they went about trying.

We are all victims in some way, but it is important not to develop a victim mentality.

I have interviewed people who were born into wealth, with high expectations placed on them, and incredible support. They, too, were victims—of expectation, comfort, and perhaps a sense of entitlement, unintentionally fostered by those who loved them most. Some became highly successful, recognizing that they were victims of their privileged circumstances, and used being a “victim” to fortify their strength and determination, to break free from their bonds, just as those who were born with little have used their circumstances. We are all victims—no one escapes.

I have interviewed people who have lost their jobs; lost their homes; lost their families; forced to live on the street who have climbed back up; people who were falsely accused; sent to prison; sent to war; lost a child to an early death; lost a wife, a brother, a sister, a friend; were the subject of intense neglect, bullying, torture, and torment; people with life-threatening injuries; life-threatening illnesses; incredible tragedy to deal with; devastating pain to persevere through; an addiction to overcome; losing what they had; facing no job prospects, no future, no hope.

A forge heats steel so that it can be shaped and formed, only to be suddenly thrust out of the comforts of the heat into coolness so it can become what it is destined to become. It is the same with people. And just as a diamond needs pressure to be formed into its splendor, it is the same with people.

Everyone has issues to overcome. Life spares no one.

Since my youth, I have carried with me the poem “If” by Rudyard Kipling, given to me by my father, in his attempt to open my eyes. The last line of that poem is: “If you can fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds’ worth of distance run, yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it, and—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!”

In contrast, I have met people, whether born with little, a lot, or somewhere in between, who use their circumstances, obstacles, and handicaps as an excuse. They live their lives with a victim mentality. The road is too daunting, the path too hard, the pain too severe—unaware or denying what they do to themselves; their fight, determination, and discipline diminished or gone.

There is no doubt that life shapes us. But we can shape the way our lives unfold and what remains of them, by how we respond to those blizzards and daunting roads—with all their hazards. Regardless of age.

As I moved into my late sixties and even more so now, at age seventy-six, I have come to understand how it is much easier to remain in a nest, to stay in a comfort zone into which one can settle, but from which a hand is needed, occasionally, to challenge, to push, to encourage, to evolve, to keep finding ways to use God-given talents. To ignore those hands, those people, that spirit, to pass on those opportunities, to flee from those moments is to close one's eyes and begin the process of burying oneself.

Adapted from *Lessons from Life: Four Keys to Living with More Meaning, Purpose, and Success at Any Age* by Steven Darter