

Crisis and Uncertainty: Paradigms of Response
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Dear Mom and Dad,

Since I left for college I have been remiss in writing and I am sorry for my thoughtlessness in not having written before. I will bring you up to date now, but before you read on, please sit down. You are not to read any further until you are sitting down, okay?

Well, then, I am getting along pretty well now. The skull fracture and the concussion I got when I jumped out the window of my dormitory when it caught on fire shortly after my arrival is pretty well healed now. I only spent two weeks in the hospital and now I can see almost normally and only get those sick headaches once a day. Fortunately, the fire in the dormitory, and my jump, were witnessed by an attendant at the gas station near the dorm, and he was the one who called the Fire Department and the ambulance. He also visited me in the hospital and since I had nowhere to live because of the burnt-out dormitory, he was kind enough to invite me to share his apartment with him. It's really a basement room, but it's kind of cute. He is a very fine boy, and we have fallen deeply in love and are planning to get married. We haven't set the exact date yet, but it will be before my pregnancy begins to show.

Yes, Mom and Dad, I am pregnant. I know how much you are looking forward to being grandparents and I know you will welcome the baby and give it the same love and devotion and tender care you gave me when I was a child. The reason for the delay in our marriage is that my boyfriend has a minor infection which prevents us from passing our premarital blood tests and I carelessly caught it from him. I know that you will welcome him into our family with open arms. He is kind and, although not well-educated, he is ambitious.

Now that I have brought you up to date, I want to tell you that there was no dormitory fire, I did not have a concussion or a skull fracture, I was not in the hospital, I am not pregnant, I am not engaged, I am not infected, and there is no boyfriend. However, I am getting a "D" in American History and an "F" in Chemistry and I want you to see those marks in their proper perspective.

*Your loving daughter,
Sharon¹*

¹ Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence* (Fourth ed.), p. 15.

At some point in our lives, all of us experience crisis; that is, some real or threatened disruption to our reality. Some of us may experience a crisis of faith, some a crisis of health. Some of us may face a crisis of loss, caused by death or the break-up of a relationship. Some of us may experience a financial crisis, such as bankruptcy, foreclosure or unemployment. Some of us may experience a crisis brought on by failure, such as failing a course or a job assignment. And some may experience a crisis of identity, reputation, or self-worth. I dare say that it is virtually impossible to live life without encountering some crisis—and usually several if you add to your own issues those of your loved ones.

This is true on the national level as well. Millions of fellow citizens live paycheck to paycheck, worrying about health insurance, food insecurity and eviction. And virtually every day brings forth new tweets and reports out of Washington that leave us aghast and fearful for our constitutional democracy, the rule of law, our national security, and the survival of our planet.

As we all know, once in a while a religious community also experiences a crisis. An embezzlement by a trusted officer or employee. A split over doctrine, a moral issue, or clergy leadership. Or, as this community experienced this past spring, the sudden departure of a rabbi and the events which precipitated it.

Yet, no matter what the nature of our crisis or our difficulty is, how we respond can dramatically affect our future. When we show fortitude and faith, we create the possibility of finding comfort. When we show courage and strength, we create the possibility of achieving wholeness. And when we don't, we can experience disintegration, distress and pain.

The biblical Cain was haunted by his crisis. Questioned by the Eternal about the whereabouts of his brother Abel, Cain denied any knowledge. "I do not know!" he lied. More defiantly still, he retorted by asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's dishonesty and avoidance of responsibility in the face of possible condemnation earned him God's, and humanity's, eternal opprobrium. The man who had made his living as a farmer was cut off from the land and condemned to wander the earth as a nomad. Everywhere he went, his mark would accompany him and haunt him. Till the end of his days, Cain was haunted not only by the murder of his brother, but by his failure to face the truth and to accept responsibility for it.

Our ancestors in the desert faced a similar fate after their scouts returned from reconnoitering the Promised Land. Though they reported that the land indeed was flowing with milk and honey, their talk of the Promised Land being inhabited by giants in fortified cities, against which the people Israel would look like grasshoppers, induced such a feeling of anxiety that the people cried out in panic. Their collective inability to face their adversity with courage and strength assured for themselves a destiny to wander and die in the desert, seeing but never reaching the Promised Land.

Cain and the generation of the scouts responded to their moments of difficulty out of a sense of fear and vulnerability. And all of them suffered worse fates than those posed by the difficulties themselves. They experienced greater hardship, greater distress, and greater pain than they would have otherwise.

Had instead they responded with honesty and courage, strength and faith, they might have emerged from those experiences more whole and more at peace.

By contrast, think about the fortitude and faith of Joseph. In his youth alone he endured three existential crises! First his brothers, filled with hatred and jealousy, cast him into a pit of snakes and scorpions, leaving him to die. Second, a band of slave traders hauled him into exile and sold him into slavery. And third, his captors threw him into jail after the lady of the house falsely accused him of a crime. Any one such crisis might have been cataclysmic. Yet Joseph's courage, fortitude and belief in redemption saw him through them all.

More recently, a woman named Edith Eger was taken captive in her native Slovakia, hauled into exile, and enslaved at Auschwitz/Birkenau and later Mauthausen. On her first day at Birkenau, she witnessed her parents being sent leftward to die while she herself was sent to rightward to labor as a slave. The very same day, the man known as the Angel of Death - who had decided the fates of her and her parents and sister Magda - came around searching for talented artists in the barracks (since he must have considered himself a man of culture).

A gifted ballerina, Edie was pushed forward by another inmate to dance before the monster himself. "Little dancer," he said, "Dance for me." He directed the musicians to begin playing "The Blue Danube," a tune to which she knew a routine so well she could dance it in her sleep. "Dance!" he commanded, and she felt her body start to move. At that moment she heard her mother tell her, "Just remember, no one can take away from you what you've put in your own mind."

And as she dances, she discovers a piece of wisdom that will save her life many times after the horror is over. "I can see," she writes, "I can see that Dr. Mengele, the seasoned killer who just this morning murdered my mother, is more pitiful than me. I am free in my mind, which he can never be. He will always have to live with what he's done. He is more a prisoner than I am." As she close her routine with a graceful split, she prays not for herself, but for him. The performance over, he tosses Edie a loaf of bread.²

Years later Edie would teach that while suffering is universal, victimhood is optional; that we become victims not because of what happens to us, but when we hold onto our victimization and allow it to define us - adopting a "way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, [and] punitive."³ In other words, we become our own jailors.

² Edith Eger, *The Choice*, pp. 166-67.

³ *Id.* at 45.

She would also become a disciple of her fellow Auschwitz survivor, Viktor Frankl, whose core message is, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”⁴

“All of the survivors I met had one thing in common with me and with one another,” writes Dr. Eger: “We had no control over the most consuming facts of our lives, but we had the power to determine how we experienced life after trauma.”⁵

Our tradition teaches still another lesson about how to view and respond to crisis.

In Hebrew crisis is called *mashber*, and its root letters — shin/bet/resh — signify the process of breaking under stress. But the word *mashber* has another connotation as well, which is that of a “birth stool,” the seat upon which a woman in ancient times sat as she gave birth. So at the same time that *mashber* means the process of breaking - perhaps the breaking of water - it also suggests the process of birth and being born. Crisis isn’t just stress; it’s giving birth. It isn’t just convulsive; it is creative.

Crises are also moments for seeking out God and for drawing on faith. When Miriam was ridden with disease, Moses prayed for her healing. When Hannah couldn’t conceive, she prayed for a child. The late Senator John McCain, in his 5 ½ years of agonizing captivity, prayed “for moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing...[and] for comfort when [he] was in pain.”⁶

They were answered. “Sometimes I received relief,” said John McCain shortly after being released. “I was sustained in many times of trial.”⁷

So in times of adversity and stress, we too might find ourselves looking to a gracious and merciful God, the Source of Life and Wholeness and Blessing and Peace.

Nor or some time far in the future, we might pray from deep within our souls:

Avinu Malkeinu, bring healing to my beloved.
 Avinu Malkeinu, grant me more affection from my family.
 Avinu Malkeinu, I don’t want to be destitute in my retirement.
 Avinu Malkeinu, grant me a second chance with my spouse.
 Avinu Malkeinu, don’t let me be so lonely this year.
 Avinu Malkeinu, help me to find meaningful work.
 Avinu Malkeinu, help others to appreciate my gifts.

⁴ *Id.* at 565 (quoting Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*).

⁵ *Id.* at 638.

⁶ John S. McCain, “Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account,” in *US News & World Report*, May 1973.

⁷ *Id.*

Avinu Malkeinu, give me confidence and strength.
Avinu Malkeinu, help me maintain proper perspective.
Avinu Malkeinu, grant me fortitude and faith.
Avinu Malkeinu, hold me and comfort me in my difficulty,

Avinu Malkeinu, help me to emerge from it whole and complete.⁸

Amen.

⁸ Inspired by Shira Koch Epstein, "Answering Prayers," *Sh'ma*, Sept. 2009. p. 2.