

Good day!

I was thinking today about how we perceive things that pop up in everyday life. Living in the 21st century is by no means an easy thing.

We are constantly confronted with challenges at work, at home, in relationships, etc. Practically everywhere we turn, things happen that may make life appear more difficult than it really is.

To a large extent, how we approach these challenges determines how easily we overcome them and how much we grow personally from having overcome them.

As many of you know, I prefer not to use the word "problem" to describe undesirable situations. Instead, I like to substitute the word "challenge" or "opportunity"?

When people put themselves down or state that they cannot overcome something, I correct them and remind them of the miracle of their potential. Why do I do this?

Well, I really believe that we become better people when we are stretched -- either mentally or physically. Just as a chess player only learns from playing (and losing to) players that are better than themselves, we usually make the greatest improvements to ourselves when we are challenged in some way.

Many times when challenges arise, I know that by applying myself, and being alert to the challenge, I should be a better person as a result of the experience -- as long as I embrace the opportunity to learn.

That's not to say that sometimes a challenge won't momentarily stagger us. In fact, it's quite normal to be angry or frightened when initially exposed to some challenges.

It takes quite a bit of practice to consistently see the positive side of every challenge.

Once we realize the benefits of being able to recognize every challenge as an opportunity to grow, we discover that we are able to address future problems with clearer vision and less stress because we know that we will overcome the challenge and be better for it.

Learning to do this also helps us to become a more positive, capable, empowered human being.

Whether it is faith in a Higher Power or faith in your ability to overcome challenge, belief that the experience exists to make you stronger should propel you towards successfully overcoming the challenge.

Many of us, when we are stressed, experience and express anger. Often, this may be inadvertently directed towards our children, either expressed as anger, impatience, etc.

There is a story that has been floating around for years around how to handle anger and the after effects of anger. The story goes like this:

*There was a little boy with a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, to hammer a nail in the back fence. The first day the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence.*

*Then it gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence. Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper.*

*The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence.*

*He said, "You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. It won't matter how many times you say 'I'm sorry', the wound is still there."*

This story comes to mind when I have occasion to be angry and makes me aware of the persistence of doing "the wrong thing".

It is quite common to forget how to enjoy life in a positive way until we are reminded in some way.

For many, the reminder comes in the form of a challenge to their mortality or to the morality of a close friend or relative.

When left until then, that person has missed a lot of opportunities to have enjoyed life and to have grown from so many of life's learning experiences.

Many years ago, I had a friend named Donna Butler who was born with a chronic heart condition. With this condition, Donna's family knew that it was a matter of time before she needed a heart transplant or that medical science would provide the technology necessary to correct her failing heart.

Donna and I knew each other from the age of 5 up through the age of 18. I remember her as someone who lived in pain and discomfort every waking moment of her life.

However, she looked upon life as something that was delicate, beautiful and something to be cherished.

She NEVER had a bad thing to say about anyone or any situation. She was constantly reminded that "today" might be her last day and she treated every day as if it were.

When she passed away at the tender age of 18, I lost a wonderful friend who really made a difference to everyone that she came in contact with.

What an example she established for everyone who knew her. I'll bet you know some people in your life who have set similar examples.

Think about how you would live if you knew that today was your last day alive. How would you live that day? Would you react to situations any differently than you currently do?

Would you be as cross with your child over a spilled drink? Would you be upset with a spouse or close friend over a simple misunderstanding or a silly argument?

When leaving a spouse or significant other to go to work, would you not bother to say "I love you" because you can always say it later (or worse, because you are angry and choose not to say it).

When finishing a conversation with a friend, would you forget to appreciate them as a friend because you will see them later?

Would you get as stressed over life's challenges if you thought that you would not live to see tomorrow, making the challenge less relevant in the grand scheme of things?

Think about it. You have 24 hours to live. Now how important is it that someone just pushed past you in the line at the local fast food restaurant? It's not worth wasting the time to get upset, is it? You have many more important things to do with your limited time.

For me personally, I have been told a few times in my life that I was dying of "some" terminal illness. In the mid 90's, I was told that I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and that I had three months to live.

By the way, the doctor told me that I shouldn't share this with my wife because it might upset her. I have to admit that I wasn't taking it too well myself!

As my doctor spoke about treatment options which depended on the outcome of some exploratory surgery, my mind wandered back through my life and I thought – "Have I done enough as a person"?

If my life ends tomorrow, will I be remembered as a good father and husband? Have I treated my friends and co-workers with the respect that they deserve?

The answer, in my mind, was a horrifying no.

Even though that was a long time ago now, I still feel that the answer is no. I still let life interfere with the actions that I know to be true and right and at times like that, when I

know I have made a major mistake regarding my relationships with those around me, I think back to Donna and her way of living and to how I felt the day I was told I was going to die as a young man. It's sad that I need reminders like this. I hope your reminders come in more benign form.

Here's an exercise that I like to suggest to people. It upsets many of them but it brings the point home quite succinctly.

If you think your life is too complex, or too stress-filled, find yourself a local children's hospital and pay a visit.

If you have the courage, go to a local children's cancer clinic. Spend a few hours there and witness what it is really like to have a serious challenge.

Experience the pain that these children are experiencing but also feel the strength that these kids exhibit. Speak to a doctor and they will describe incredible stories of hope to you.

The kids, their parents and the doctors know that they have serious challenges ahead. However, from the innocence of youth come strength and a positive outlook.

These kids are often stronger than their parents.

Take a look around you and then reassess your own situation.

It doesn't look as bad anymore, does it?

I have held more than one grown man in my arms while standing in a parking lot of a children's hospital, weeping as he realized his priorities and attitudes were not what they should be.

Remember as well, the role that humor can play in helping make your life brighter.

People who work with me (or see me outside of work), know me as someone who cracks a lot of jokes, one-liners, etc. (sometimes too many, I know).

The reason I do it is to keep the atmosphere around me light and buoyant.

I internalize a lot and if I can't keep my mood light and positive looking when certain situations arise, then I get upset.

We all know that getting upset doesn't solve anything in the long run. So humor offers a distraction and prevents me from over-analyzing a situation that is not as bad as it would appear if I think about it too deeply!

I'd like to close with a couple of quotes. Einstein once wrote about his three laws of work, namely:

1. *Out of clutter, find simplicity.*
2. *From discord, find harmony.*
3. *In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.*

I like to refer to them as his three laws of living.

The complicated, difficult, challenging thing we call life is actually a wonderful educator that helps us to grow as people.

However, we have to view it as a learning opportunity otherwise the opportunity to grow as a person is lost.

William Butler Yeats also has a beautiful quote on living. It is:

*"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived"*

Say no more.

Abraham Lincoln wrote that *"most people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be"*.

Part of viewing life this way ties back to some of our previous posts regarding doing good things for others. Doing good things for others will lighten your spirits and make it easier for you to see life in a positive way.

In parting, try this. Compliment three friends or family members every day regarding some task that they have completed. Say it with sincerity. They will appreciate it -- and you will feel great about it.

Create a great day!

Harry

PS:

I wrote the original version of this post two days before 9/11. Three of the recipients of this email died in the WTC and to this day, serve as a poignant reminder to me of the necessity to treasure every moment. Please take the time to treasure your gifts – they are numerous and incredible.