



THE GIFT OF ADVERSITY

The Unexpected Benefits
of Life's Difficulties,
Setbacks, and Imperfections

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The Fixer: My father's practical approach to helping people in trouble

I try to be the fixer of situations and I gravitate to people who are institutional misfits

Stephan Jenkins

If you were in crisis, my father was a great go-to person. Everybody seemed to know that instinctively, if not by reputation. If the crisis was embarrassing, you had the comfort of knowing that he would never judge you. His approach was purely pragmatic. His question was always, "How can this best be fixed?" Then he would say or do whatever was needed to make that happen.

Some teachers at our school and their spouses had occasion to call upon my father in this connection. How do I know? He told me, of course – which he certainly should not have done. He regarded it as part of my education, which I suppose it was. To my credit, I respected his confidences.

One female teacher approached my father to say that she and her husband were contemplating divorce. She had met a man with whom the husband suspected she had had an affair. The husband had been a good partner for many years and she did not want to lose him. My father assessed the situation. "Did you have an affair?" he asked. She said she had, but it was now over. "You have to deny it," said my father. "Your husband will never accept it and it will mean the end of your marriage."

She took his advice and the couple remained together happily (or as happily as they had ever been) till death did them part.

The husband of a different teacher also approached my father, also with a story of infidelity. As he told me the story, my father, who was an accomplished amateur actor, played the various roles. First, he took the role of the husband – let's call him Louie – walking along the sidewalk, innocently minding his own business. Then my father adopted the seductive look of a woman of the street, beckoning to Louie, who followed like a man in thrall. Next my father became the husband (?pimp) of the woman – delighted to catch poor Louie in a

compromising position, whipping out an imaginary camera, snapping several imaginary shots – pop, pop, pop. And finally, he portrayed poor Louie again, crestfallen on realizing that he’s been entrapped.

“Have you told Zelda?” my father asked Louie. His terror visible, Louie said he had not. (As Zelda had been my teacher, I could well understand his fear.) “What do these people want from you?” my father asked.

“Money,” said Louie. “They say if I give them a hundred rands, they’ll go away.”

“They won’t,” my father said. “It will be just the beginning. Tell Zelda everything. Apologize. Tell her you don’t know what got into you.”

Louie did exactly that, and I’m sure Zelda had plenty to say, but if so, there is no record of it. The bottom line is that she forgave Louie and they also lived happily ever after (or at least as happily as they ever had) till death did them part.

It is tricky to give direct advice even when you’re asked for it. Your advice could be wrong, and it is usually best if people can solve their own problems. But my father was a fixer. That’s what people came to him for, and in these two instances, it worked out.

Without necessarily endorsing my father’s advice, I learned a great deal from these two vignettes:

First, be there for someone in crisis. Don’t judge the person at that moment. Judgment is the last thing a person needs because shame is very painful. Your acceptance of the person, if not of the actions, will ease that shame. It’s like putting balm on a wound. If the action is so reprehensible that you can’t deal with it, that is your prerogative. In most instances, however, you may be in a position to help the person and perhaps anyone who was wronged, and to make matters better.

Second: Listen well, then customize your advice to suit the situation. While a single transgression – infidelity – was at the root of both dilemmas, the advised

actions were quite different. People and circumstances are too complex for any one-size-fits-all approach.

Be slow to judge people who are in crisis. If you choose to give advice, be sure to customize it to the people and circumstances.



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