

“Lots of Luck”

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Reading

words of Howard Thurman

The tendency to fix responsibility is inescapable. If responsibility for ills can be pinned down, then the possibility of attacking and uprooting them is very real. This possibility is in the profound confidence that a structure of moral integrity undergirds all of life; that such a structure is basic in the totality of all experience. Things do not happen, merely; they are part of some kind of rationale. If this can be tracked down and understood, then the living experience, however terrible, makes sense. Even though one is never able to accomplish this tracking down, one cannot destroy the confidence that the logic of all ills is knowable.

“Lots of Luck”

I'm a bit embarrassed to admit it,
but I never board a plane,
without touching the outside of the aircraft
as I pass through the door
and muttering the words: “May we return safely home to earth.”

I've consistently carried out this little ritual
countless times over almost three decades of flying.

Though I don't personally believe there to be a deity in the heavens
to answer such prayers, the truth is, I'm a bit afraid to stop now,
given that my little ritual has proved so wildly successful.

I have a terrific track record.

Through many years of air travel, I, and the planes I've flown in,
haven't once failed to return to *terra firma*, safe and sound.

My good luck ritual has saved the day over and over again!

Still, I never board a plane without thinking of the dangers,

without giving thorough thought to all the catastrophes that could come.

I know in saying that, that many of you would be quick to reassure me with the standard wisdom that flying is one of the safest forms of travel.

While that may be true, none of you is married to Bob.

In the course of obtaining his degrees in aerospace and aeronautical engineering, Bob studied all manner of things that can go wrong with an airplane, from bird strikes to a complete melt-down of an engine if coolant is lost.

This is all good information for engineers to have, of course. It's great they have this body of knowledge and can build upon it to make air travel safer.

But, as it turns out, such details aren't particularly comforting to hear from a seat-mate, let alone your spouse, as you're strapped into a jet loaded with fuel careening down the runway.

More than once I've had to ask Bob to keep this knowledge to himself, not only to calm my own nerves, but to prevent our being expelled from the plane or, worse, being arrested for discussing the many ways to bring down an aircraft.

Bob's loving response to me usually involves statistics. He's trying to be comforting. Really, he is.

And in some strange way, it works. Oddly enough, knowing a bit about statistics actually helps in questions of luck, if you let it.

There's something about understanding the odds, that can set one's anxious mind at ease.

Knowledge of the odds in any given situation can also deeply alter how we make meaning

of whatever comes our way—whether it be a windfall
of spectacularly good fortune,
or a spate of bad luck that besets our best laid plans.

It is, after all, a highly theological concern
to assign meaning to whatever happens to us, be it good or be it bad.

Listen again to those words from Howard Thurman:

The tendency to fix responsibility is inescapable.

If responsibility for ills can be pinned down,
then the possibility of attacking and uprooting them is very real.

This possibility is in the profound confidence
that a structure of moral integrity undergirds all of life;
that such a structure is basic in the totality of all experience.

Things do not happen, merely;
they are part of some kind of rationale.

If this can be tracked down and understood,
then the living experience, however terrible, makes sense.

Even though one is never able to accomplish this tracking down,
one cannot destroy the confidence that the logic of all ills is knowable.

How we hunger for that confidence, that certainty.

I'll confess that I don't so easily share Thurman's "profound confidence
that a structure of moral integrity undergirds all of life."

What exists, I believe, in this regard is of our own making.

But, still, how enticing the thought can be to us—
as meaning-making creatures—
that there is always an answer, a reason, a logical rationale
when misfortune comes our way, when our luck runs out,
and we are left with the stark and sobering question of "why?"
"Why me?" "Why now?"

Perhaps the more mature question, though,
is to wonder “why not?” “Why not me?”

There are times in life’s hardest stretches, in its worst moments,
when meaning is hard to find, or not to be found, at all.

There are some events, be they marked by tragedy or triumph,
that seem—and are—completely, utterly random.

There is no meaningful pattern to be uncovered,
no viable explanation to suss out.

Sometimes, things just happen—
happen for no other reason than that those were the odds.

Whether we call it good luck or bad,
accepting the fact of life’s erratic twists and turns
can be a terribly difficult thing to do.

The Buddhist teacher, Bo Lozoff tells the story
of looking intensely at his own fears.¹

He explains that he spent a long time on retreat,
examining the question of what it means to be human.

His central practice was to repeat over and over the mantra:
“Anything that can happen to a human being may happen to me,
and I accept the truth of this.”

He said:

I would repeat it silently,
while countless images and scenarios flitted across my mind—
cancer, blindness, amputation, my wife or son being murdered, and
so on. With each image, I silently, often with frightened surrender,
bowed in acceptance of the possibility.

It wasn’t macabre or perverse at all;
it was a quieting and deeply humbling process.

¹ Bo Lozoff, *It’s a Meaningful Life, It Just Takes Practice*, p. 70-71.

Obviously, I [didn't] want any of those things to happen.

But to be fully alive, to meet... life as a full human being,
unafraid of reality and with both eyes wide open,
you must accept the simple truth
that anything that can happen to a human being may happen to you.²

Anything.

I don't know about you, but I find it a struggle
to accept that anything and everything could come my way.

Most of us seem to pick and choose.

It's easy for many of us to think the good things are deserved,
and the bad things not.

And, it's just as easy for some of us to think the very opposite:
that the bad that befalls us was brought on by ourselves
and that we don't in any way merit life's blessings.

I know people in each category, and I've been in both myself.
Sometimes there is truth to each of these feelings.
Sometimes, for better and for worse,
we get what we deserve.

And sometimes, we don't.

Luck seems to be the name we've given to that fickle fact.

The truth is, though, that any life is a bittersweet blend
of both the happy and the heartbreaking,
of lucky breaks and ill fortune.

The question is how we decide to make sense
of the particular blend that has been ours.

² Bo Lozoff, *It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice*, p. 70.

How we chalk up the facts of our life
to bad luck, good luck, dumb luck, or no luck at all.

Whether we ascribe what happens to fate, to kismet, to destiny.

Or whether we simply see the cause and effect of our decisions,
the consequences of our actions,
the karma for what we have done,
and what we have left undone.

How we answer those questions tells the story of our life.

It reveals the extent to which we understand
that there are things under our complete control,
and many, many things far beyond our power to manage or change.

It demonstrates where we take responsibility,
and where we recognise there's none to be taken.

It shows how we make sense of whatever privilege we've been given,
whether it is to have been loved and nurtured as a child,
to have been given the gift of education,
or to live in a country as blessed as Canada
at the dawn of a new millennium.

Most any story is the story of luck.

In sorting this through, in making sense of your own story,
I would caution against relying on what I call theologies of convenience.

Such theologies are those ways of seeing a circumstance
in terms that are especially favourable to ourselves,
but that tend to not hold up as necessarily true for everyone else.

An enduring example is found in those people
who always appear on the news, right after some disaster strikes.

You know the ones, the people who talk about feeling fortunate,
the ones who can say it all happened for a reason
because they were spared the worst of it.

The ones who say God saved them for a purpose.

Too often, I cringe as the camera sweeps over
to the next people to be interviewed, the ones who, inevitably,
didn't make out quite so well—or the grief-stricken loved ones
of the people who didn't make it out at all.

It's hard for the victims of any tragedy
—any turn of bad luck—
to hear it all happened for a reason,
especially when the truth often is
that Mother Nature has mind of her own,
that machinery sometimes malfunctions,
that humans make terrible mistakes
and do damage that can't be easily undone.

The problem with a theology of convenience is its lack of consistency.
If it doesn't ring true for both the fortunate and the otherwise,
there's likely a serious flaw to be addressed.

I find that such theologies are not ultimately helpful,
though they can be satisfying—at least
until you find yourself on the other end of the luck gamut.

I believe instead, that in making sense of whatever life brings,
we are better served by a theology
that manages to account for both life's joy and its sorrow—
a theology that can hold both our happiness and our heartache.

For me, such a theology is rooted in the stubborn fact
that we find ourselves spinning on a small blue-green planet
in a cold, dark swirling universe that can often be hostile to human need.

Though we often fail to remember, we live our lives in and around
the whims of powerful natural forces
that give shape to the earth and the universe beyond.

Anything that can happen to a human on this planet may happen to us—
blizzards, earthquakes, meteor showers, and more.

And, yet, this theology must also be rooted in a second fact,

ultimately more important than the first, yet no less astounding:
the miracle of life itself.

The miracle we behold in a baby's first breath,
in the last breath drawn by a loved one,
in the breath that we are drawing here and now.

Even on our most desperate days, we would do well to recall
the magnificent set of circumstances that have conspired
from the dawn of time, that we find ourselves,
living, breathing, sentient beings sitting together in this room today.

What an extraordinarily good stroke of luck!

What an amazingly lucky break that from a Big Bang,
life emerged and gave birth to the possibilities
we now know in our hearts and hands.

In the poetic words of Robert Weston:

Out of the stars, rising from rocks
and the sea,
kindled by sunlight on earth,
arose life.

Ponder this thing in your heart, [he says,]
life up from sea:
Eyes to behold, throats to sing,
mates to love. . . .

This is the wonder of time;
this is the marvel of space;
out of the stars swung the earth;
[and] life upon [the] earth rose to love. . . .

As I said a few moments ago, I'm not entirely convinced
of Thurman's preexisting structure of moral integrity undergirding life,
but I am confident that I see within us—
the latest beneficiaries of that spark of life born from the stars
that rose from the sea to love—
an ever-growing commitment to build a world of justice and peace.

There are days when that vision is sorely tested.
To be sure, the path to that distant day is long and full of difficulty.

It feels that the odds are very rarely in our favour.

And, yet, imagine the great lot of luck we've had thus far—
and the tremendous odds we've overcome.

Let us, then, we give thanks for the good fortune
that has created and upholds our life.

Let us endure any misfortune that comes our way,
knowing that it is the great teacher of what it means to be human.

And let us cherish this dance we do with luck itself,
seeing the grace of the world that often dwells within.

Amen.

Closing Words

Our closing words come from John Seed's book, *Thinking Like a Mountain*.

We call upon the power which sustains the planets in their orbits,
that wheels our Milky Way in its 200 million year spiral,
to imbue our [lives]
with harmony, endurance, and joy.

Fill us with a sense of immense time
so that our brief, flickering lives
may truly reflect the work of vast ages past
and also the millions of years of evolution
whose potential
lies in our trembling hands.”

So be it.