

“Keep Going!”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

On June 18th, 1947, on a PanAm flight from Calcutta to New York, an engine stopped working, which caused another engine to overheat, which caused a fire, which caused a panic.¹

While the pilot attempted to land the plane, the 25-year-old co-pilot unbuckled himself and went into the main cabin to help with the passengers.

He sat next to a young woman who was alone and told her it was going to be okay.

He told her this as he watched the engine continue to burn.
He told her this as he watched the flaming engine fall from the wing.

He told her this as fuel lines became exposed, as fire overtook the aircraft, and the plane pitched downward.

He told her this knowing that every single person on that plane was likely about to die.

Shortly thereafter, the plane crashed into the Syrian desert.

Fourteen of the people on board died instantly.
Two crew members survived, including the co-pilot.

With a pair of broken ribs, he went back into the burning plane multiple times to pull survivors from the wreckage.

The last passenger he rescued,

¹ True story, as related on theoatmeal.com.

before the plane was completely engulfed in flames, died in his arms.

Eventually the wind turned, and fire overtook the aircraft.

As the fire burned out, the small band of survivors waited alone in the overwhelming darkness of the desert night.

Morning eventually arrived, but a rescue crew did not.

So, the co-pilot took charge and formed two search parties.

The first party went in one direction,
the second party, along with the co-pilot,
went in the other, wandering into the desert.

Eventually, this group found a village that had a radio.
A call was made, and the twenty-two survivors were rescued.

As for the co-pilot, the crash changed him forever.

After that, he didn't want to be a pilot anymore;
he wanted to do something different with his life.

This was, after all, the third plane crash he'd been in over a short span of years.

He probably thought why push his luck.
I mean, how many plane crashes can one
reasonably expect to walk away from?!

So, the young man resigned from PanAm
to pursue a career in writing and then, ultimately, in television.

Those of you who are devoted fans of the original *Star Trek*
may recognize this to be the true life story Gene Roddenberry,
the man who would go on to create the illustrious series.

Long before he had conjured up Spock and Captain Kirk, though,
Roddenberry was a pilot, first in the army, and then for PanAm.

I share this story from his background because it illustrates, so well,
the quote at the top of your Orders of Service—

a quote most often misattributed to Winston Churchill:
“If you find yourself in hell, keep going!”

Now, co-piloting a crashing plane has certainly got to rank up there
as one of the Dante’s nine circles of hell.

Not only are you fearing for your own life,
you’re aware you’re about to be intimately involved
with the potential deaths of everyone entrusted to your care and expertise.

What a horrific hell to be in.

And, yet, as with any given hell we might find ourselves in,
the most pertinent question always centres on what we intend to do about it.

It’s not about how we might acclimatize to our new, hotter circumstances.
It’s not about investing critical time and energy in pondering
just how it is that the fires of hell are lapping at our heels.
It’s about doing what we can to keep going.

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In Buddhism, there is a famous teaching,
known as the “Parable of the Poisoned Arrow.”

It was the Buddha’s response to his student
who asked too many ethereal questions about metaphysics.

But it’s also a practical commentary on the alleviation of suffering.

The Buddha said:

It’s just as if a man were wounded
with an arrow thickly smeared with poison.²

His friends and companions, kinsmen and relatives
would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say,

² “Calu-Malunkyovada Sutta: The Shorter Instructions to Malunkya (MN 63)”, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight*.

‘I won’t have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a priest, a merchant, or a worker.’

He would say, ‘I won’t have this arrow removed until I know the given name and clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-coloured... until I know his home village, town, or city... until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow... until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated... until I know whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or another bird... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey.’

And the man would die
and those things would still remain unknown to him.

Now, for God’s sake, for the Buddha’s sake, for his own sake,
you just really want to yell out: “Remove the arrow,” don’t you?!

Yet, it can be so easy to get bogged down in hell.

To settle in, and start ordering flame-retardant curtains for the new place—you know, since this is going to be home for a while.

But the true mark of resilience is seen in someone
who doesn’t accept the present hell as a future they intend to live into.

We see the signs of resilience in someone when they choose to keep going.

To do so requires holding forth a vision, a determination,
that they will get out of this, alive.

That’s, of course, was what Roddenberry did on that plane.

On a very practical level, he moved from the cockpit to what turned out to be a much safer seat on an ill-fated flight.

This gave him an obvious advantage, even if it wasn't the motivation behind his decision to move.

But, perhaps more important was his outward confidence that everything would be okay. That all would be well.

We can question whether it was morally acceptable for him to repeat such words of assurance to the woman on the plane. Arguably, it would have been more truthful to say, at the very least, "I don't know what's going to happen, but it isn't looking good."

I firmly believe people nearing the end of their lives should be made aware of the reality of their situation, so they can make whatever decisions or take whatever final steps they need to.

And, yet, I've read that one of the most significant factors in whether a person survives a plane crash, or some other horrific situation, often boils down to a person's conviction that whatever challenging circumstances they're in won't be their ultimate demise.

They're determined this isn't going to be the way their story ends.

Now, it has to be said that such determination isn't always enough. It certainly wasn't enough for the passengers who died.

Sometimes you need luck, or medicine, or some other sort of intervention to be able to pull through and make it out alive.

But the important point here is that our attitudes can make a vital difference whenever we're trying to work our way out of hell.

And they can make the all-important difference in what's to come, once we've been to hell and back.

Resilience isn't just about surviving an ordeal. It's about bouncing back from it, and going on to have a better, fuller life.

This is where the well-worn wisdom that
“what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger” shows itself to actually be true.

Recent studies have shown that we humans
are more resilient than we tend to imagine, or recognize.

While Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD,
has entered our lexicon in recent decades and is used frequently
to describe the profound lingering effects from trauma,
the encouraging news is that more than 75% of those who
“experience a life-threatening or violent event
emerge without a stress disorder.”³

In fact, up to 70% of people who experience trauma,
go on to see positive gains as a result—
so much so that this is now referred to
in the psychological community as “Post-Traumatic Growth.”⁴

Storytelling is essential to this type of growth.

How we make sense of our story—and how we tell that story—
is critical to our capacity to recover from a terrible hardship.
It’s critical to our capacity for resilience.

As Richard Tedeschi, a major research professor in this field, puts it:
“trauma is a shock that ruptures the central story
that you thought was your life.
The recurring patterns that make up life are disrupted.
The sense of safety is lost.
Having faced death, people in these circumstances
are forced to confront the elemental questions of life.
But some people are able to write a new story.”⁵

So it is that the “growth comes not from the event
but from the struggle afterward to write a new story
that imagines a life better than before.”

³ David Brooks, “Tales of the Super Survivors,” *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015.

⁴ Scott Barry Kaufman and Carolyn Gregoire, “The Surprising Benefit Of Going Through Hard Times,” *Huffington Post*, 2 January 2016.

⁵ David Brooks, “Tales of the Super Survivors,” *The New York Times*, 24 November 2015.

“Researchers have found that people who thrive after a shock are able to tell clear, forward-looking stories about themselves, while those who don’t thrive get stuck ruminating darkly about the past.”

“Book 1 is life before the event.
Book 2 is the event that shattered the old story.
But Book 3 is reintegration, a reframing new story
that incorporates what happened
and then points to a more virtuous and meaningful life
than the one before.”

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I’ve often said there are people in the world
who are in desperate need of a “near-death experience.”

I’m joking when I say that, but only to a degree.

There is something about being
brought up to and even pushed beyond our breaking points—
being confronted by life’s heart-breaking twists and turns—
that helps us fragile, resilient humans
to more fully appreciate how very precious a gift it is to be alive.

For better and for worse, hardship shows us what we’re made of.

Bones that can break.
Minds that can scar.
Flesh that can ache in agony.
Hearts that can be torn asunder.

But also flesh and bones that can heal.
Hearts and minds that can mend and grow and open
to hold more than we ever thought possible.

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In this life, hell comes to each of us in time and turn, if to varying degree.

When you find yourself there, be it a hell of your own making,

or a hell completely beyond your control, do all you can to keep going.

Keep going to the future that is beyond the pain.

Keep going to write a better end to the story that is you.

Keep going, with each step,
blessing and calling forth the gift of life within.

Whatever you do, keep going.

Closing Words “Affirmation” by Leonard Mason #470

We affirm the unfailing renewal of life.

*Rising from the earth, and reaching for the sun,
all living creatures shall fulfill themselves.*

We affirm the steady growth of human companionship.

*Rising from ancient cradles and reaching for the stars,
people the world over shall seek the ways of understanding.*

We affirm a continuing hope

*That out of every tragedy the spirits of individuals
shall rise to build a better world.*