

OUTSIDE THE BOX

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Weathering the Storm

Perhaps the most defining element of humanity is our ability to share stories with one another and to learn, grow and develop from the experiences of others. More often than not, the deepest learning comes from hardship, challenge and adversity.

Consider the case of Admiral James Stockdale who spent 8 years in a Vietnamese prisoner of war

(POW) camp where he was severely tortured on 20 different occasions — this is a storm so horrible I am incapable of imaging the pain, fear and isolation that defined his life and those of other POWs. Years after his release, Stockdale was asked if he lost faith during those awful years.

“I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

However, there was also the sad realization that the most optimistic POWs did not survive.

“They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ Christmas would come, and go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

The difference in weathering their storm was to never lose faith while doggedly confronting the reality of the conditions staring them in the face. Stockdale took decisive action in direct response to the hellish conditions he and his fellow prisoners were experiencing. He developed systems of communication to sustain

their connections, he found ways to better cope with torture, and he found innovative means to deliver information to the outside world.

It’s about growth

Be it a cyclone in our personal

“Face each new day with a question — ‘what am I supposed to learn today?’”
– Dr. Bob Taylor


or professional lives, the Stockdale paradox provides a model not only to survive but to experience transformative growth. Grit and resilience are the direct results of our capacity to set aside self-deception, embarrassment or fear of humiliation and to lean into the reality of the difficulties and burdens standing in our way with strength of faith and toughness. Any expectation that life will be easy or that things will go our way without sacrifice pave the road to disillusionment.

Too often we get caught in seeking outcomes that we assume will be accompanied by happiness — if only we get more rain; if only the markets improve, then we would be happy. Each of these outcomes

are beyond our direct control and if contentment depends on them, happiness lies beyond our reach.

However, if we reframe the narrative so happiness no longer depends on the outcome of some event; but is an intentional choice, then we set the stage to move through the storm meaningfully changed by the experience.

My mentor, Dr. Bob Taylor, was a remarkable human being — a man defined by curiosity, service and wisdom. He was diagnosed with cancer and throughout that long and arduous battle, he faced each new day with a question — “What am I supposed to learn today?” Even though his body would succumb to the disease, it never defeated him as he was able to find joy and meaning in each experience life threw his way.

The next time you are battered by the storm, remember the lessons from Stockdale and Taylor. You too can weather the storm. 

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