

The Gift of Adversity

There was a man who would immerse his entire body in a tub of scalding hot water once a month so he could feel pain in every extremity. His name was Dr. Paul Brand, a world authority on leprosy who worked as a medical missionary among lepers in the remote areas of India. Laboratory testing facilities were not available and he used this “hot tub” test to determine if he had contracted leprosy. Pain in all parts of his body meant there was life and not the deadness and decay that are part of this dreaded disease.

The pain of adversity, which is often more emotional than physical, can help us define the reality of life and know when change may be needed.

Painful Circumstances

Leading and managing a business comes with adversity, pain, stress, and failures. While we have often been recognized for our successes, we know as a board about our warts and moles and the mistakes we have made along the way. As I was preparing for this board meeting, I was reminded of some of those painful times:

- ✦ failures of new business initiatives;
- ✦ conduct of associates and employees that was not consistent with our objectives and which in one case led to a criminal investigation;

- ✦ litigation that resulted in large and unwarranted judgments;
- ✦ termination of employment when people could not accept change or could no longer be trusted;
- ✦ situations where my personal performance or that of my close associates did not live up to the expectations of our people and shareholders.

In some cases, pain and stress have come from pushing myself and others to that next level of performance. Risk of failure can be a motivation to succeed. On the other hand, knowing that failure might adversely affect the entire organization—like when we stretched the balance sheet to a ten-to-one debt-to-equity ratio in order to finance the growth of our consumer services—is the pain and burden of a leader who has to make a decision, on behalf of the entire organization, that the potential benefit will outweigh the risk.

Organizations, like people, can be softened by too much success. Continuing to do what was successful in the past is seldom the formula for the future. The pain of experiencing a shrinking rather than a growing business can be an important wake-up call for making a major change. Sometimes the firm needs a “hot tub” before it can achieve that next cycle of growth.

Personal Control

In a talk given in the fall of 1939 entitled “Learning in a Time of War,” C. S. Lewis reminded the students entering Oxford University that the adversity of war really doesn’t change the major issues in life. But it does help define the reality that people are not in control over most of these issues, including the choices of when and how they come into this world, when and how they leave it, and what comes after. What the students did have in their control, however, was how they would spend their time that day. Lewis suggested that, since they were at a place of learning, they should be about the process of learning and, as they did so,

to also think about who was in control and what was their relationship to Him.

For me, as it was with C. S. Lewis, God the Creator is the One who is in control. He is a God of love, our refuge in times of trouble and pain. For those who trust in God, He has promised to bear our daily burdens. And in times of stress and adversity, we can know the “peace of God which transcends all understanding.”

This God-given inner strength has been an important part of my ability to lead through times of adversity. I believe these difficult times are all part of growing and maturing in my relationship with God. The pain of adversity has confirmed for me the gift of life and the opportunity of tomorrow.

POINTS TO PONDER:

- ✦ The pain of adversity, which is often more emotional than physical, can help us define the reality of life and know when change may be needed.
- ✦ Organizations, like people, can be softened by too much success. Continuing to do what was successful in the past is seldom the formula for the future.
- ✦ For those who trust in God, He has promised to bear our daily burdens. And in times of stress and adversity, we can know the “peace of God which transcends all understanding.”

Questions:

- ✦ What have been the most painful experiences you’ve gone through in your business life? What lessons did you learn from them?
- ✦ Have you or your company been softened by too much success?
- ✦ Have times of adversity or pain taught you about the character of God? About your own character?

