

An audacity we didn't know we had

There are several ways to survive the interruptions of life. One way is to assume that what we don't want to have happen but can't change is God's mind for us—mysterious, but magical nevertheless. Another way is to endure what we can't change, however reluctantly, as a demonstration of some kind of virtue, the successful accomplishment of a great cosmic test that in the mathematics of the universe comes out to our credit.

We can, in other words, simply assume that life is a “plan” God makes for us. We see ourselves, in this view, as a collection of dancing puppets on a string, free within the range of the twine, but captive to its latitudes. It is thus God the Puppeteer who becomes responsible for everything in life, not us. We are simply victims of God's designs. Whatever happens happens because God wants whatever malignant thing it is. Everything is always God's will: God's will that the poor are poor, that women are routinely beaten, that lives are ruined, warped, broken, and desperately unstable. At issue in this case, is not how to handle struggle; at issue is faith. What's wrong with me, I think, is not that I don't understand the gifts of struggle; what's wrong with me is some kind of primal and basic spiritual infidelity that keeps me from accepting what must be God's will.

There is a second way to deal with struggle, just as groundless, just as unhelpful as the first. We can assume that God is the Magician whose role it is to save us from the realities of life. God the Magician molds circumstances and consequences to our liking. This God makes red lights turn green so we're not inconvenienced and sees to it that suffering and death and pain become a kind of vending machine game. Put enough suffering in, get a blessing out.

But God is not a puppeteer and God is not a magic act. God is the ground of our being, the energy of life, the goodness out of which all things are intended to grow to fullness. Yet it is a struggle. How can we possibly square a good God with the suffering of innocents and the hardship of failure?

It is the Jacob story, I think, that best exposes the nature of struggle. In the Jacob story of Genesis are embedded all the dimensions of depression and despair, and all the seeds of growth and hope, as well. The story reads thus:

That same night ... Jacob was left alone. And there was one that wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him in the socket of his hip, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled. The one said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob answered, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Israel, because you have been strong against God.” Jacob named the place Peniel, “Because I have seen God face to face and survived.” The sun rose as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.

In the story of Jacob and the heavenly figure with whom he wrestles, we begin to see the elements of struggle and the unfolding, as well, of the gifts of the spirit that go with them. Jacob faces change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and scarring. They are the price to be paid for becoming new. To struggle is to begin to see the world differently. It tests all the faith in the goodness of God that we have ever professed. It requires an audacity we did not know we had. It demands a commitment to the truth. It tests our purity of heart. It brings total metamorphosis of soul. If we are willing to persevere through the depths of struggle we can emerge with conversion, self-acceptance, endurance, faith, surrender, and a kind of personal growth that takes us beyond pain to understanding. What we see is the fullness of the self come to birth in the only way it really can: in labor and under trial.

—from [Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope](#) by Joan Chittister

30th March 2020