

Hearing God in a Time of Crisis

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Defining Visions for Our Life Sometimes Come When Our Foundations Are Shaken

How Crises Arouse Visionary Insight

There are at least six ways a crisis can open us to understanding our life's purpose and mission more fully.

1. Crises activate our right-brain thinking. One important reason a crisis may foster critical insight into our life's direction is that it frees us from our bondage to the left-brain thinking that normally dominates our outlook. Left-brain activity is essential for most of the routines and functions of daily life. But far-reaching visionary inspirations always evolve from our brain's right hemisphere. Since our left- and right-brain functions are exclusive to an important extent, the "Eureka! I've found it!" insights rarely emerge when we're preoccupied with routine responsibilities.

This is why those pace-setting epiphanies about our life's mission usually occur when we're on vacation, on retreat, in the shower or doing something mindless and relaxing. These are activities that free our right brain to function more fully and creatively. A crisis, ironically, may bring the same benefit, for it forces a break with our normal routine and compels us to set left-brain activities aside. Human potential writer Gene N. Landrum goes as far as to call crisis "the mother of creativity."**

This isn't to say that we should *seek* a crisis or that we have to have one to precipitate a life-changing vision for our future. There are much more pleasant ways to encourage such epiphanies, to say the least; a vacation at the beach or a personal retreat in the mountains may accomplish the purpose just as effectively. But it is simply to say that the crises we inevitably experience can be the setting for breakthrough visions about our life as well. This is true, in part, because of how God has fashioned our intellect and creative process.

2. Crises knock out the props that keep us too grounded in our present security and unwilling to risk. Realizing our potential, and finding God's best for our life in any area, always requires steps that from our human standpoint seem like risks. The willingness to risk, and to risk big, is absolutely essential if we're to experience life as God intends it and open ourselves fully to his provision.

This openness to risk is often strong when we're young and imagine that we have an endless future to redeem any mistakes. As we grow older, we typically grow too risk-adverse. We may still long for greater adventure, a stronger sense of mission and work

that more clearly taps our potential. Yet we've hit a stride in life that's comfortable, and we fear risking what we've gained for the sake of an uncertain future.

Sometimes a crisis knocks out a prop directly that is standing in the way of God's best for us. A woman wants to go into business for herself and has the talent to do so, but sticks with a job that has her working far beneath her potential. Then the company for whom she works goes bankrupt. Now, unemployed, she realizes she has much less to lose by starting her own venture and takes the plunge.

In other cases a crisis knocks out a prop indirectly and symbolically. During this past week, as the networks have aired the unthinkable footage of the Twin Towers collapsing repeatedly in an almost endless video loop, who among us hasn't reflected often on how the possessions in which we personally take security are temporary and can vanish in a second? That insight in itself is redemptive, and can free us to risk losing what we have for the sake of God's greater purpose for our life. In that spirit we may be able to recognize more clearly a new direction he wants us to take.

3. Crises deepen our appreciation for the gift of life itself, and strengthen our sense of urgency to seize the opportunities we have. In the same way, a crisis reminds us that life itself is an unspeakable gift of God; the opportunities we have are not endless, and choices do not present themselves forever. We're awe-struck that God has given us the privilege of life, and more determined now to make something of it. It was this realization, springing from his close brush with death in the plane crash, that convinced Michener to begin writing, a decision that changed the course of his life -- and literary history -- forever.

4. Crises draw us closer to God and open us more genuinely to his direction. The greatest potential benefit of a crisis, far and away, is that it can strengthen our relationship with Christ. We're driven in our brokenness to seek his comfort, and in our helplessness to seek his help and direction.

Of course, a crisis may do just the opposite: it may ignite our anger at God for tearing from our life something we treasured. This reaction is normal and human, and can be a necessary part of the grieving process through which we recover and heal. When David and a team of helpers were returning the ark to Israel from Philistine, God slew two of David's assistants who touched the ark inappropriately. David's immediate response was anger at God and fear ([1 Chronicles 13:9-11](#)).

Yet in time the experience humbled David and deepened his relationship with God. That outcome is the ideal for each of us -- and the sooner we can reach that point the better. In many cases a crisis thrusts us there immediately. This clearly has been the case for many of us who've been stunned by the tragedies of September 11. We've felt compelled to pray for those who are suffering and to seek God's encouragement for ourselves. And we've recognized more fully than ever how desperately we need God's help in a life that now seems far less stable than we imagined.

It's in this state of mind and heart that God is best able to communicate with us, and in which important insight into our life's direction is most likely to come.

5. Crises stimulate our desire to help others, and help us better recognize how our life can benefit others. The events of September 11 demonstrated the worst possible side of human nature. Yet they quickly brought out the very best in people as well, as millions throughout the world were deeply moved to look for some way to extend their help.

Some -- a relative few -- have been in a position to help with emergency relief. Many others have felt frustrated by the overwhelming level of need and the lack of any obvious way they can make a meaningful contribution. A friend writes me, "I find myself unable to even know how to pray properly about it as there are so many people affected . . . killed, injured, grieving, agonizing over just not knowing what happened to their loved one. . . . I can't even imagine the pain being experienced by so many thousands." She adds that she would like to donate blood but doubts hers would be acceptable, since she is a cancer survivor.

Whether or not we are able to assist with this or any crisis directly, the fact that it arouses our desire to help is itself a positive factor. We can be startled to discover just how deeply we're capable of caring for others and hurting over their misfortune, and how greatly we yearn to do something significant to make a difference. Even a crisis that slams us and disables us personally can bolster our compassion for others, for it deepens our empathy for those who are suffering the same hardship.

It's at this point when our compassion is ignited that we're most inclined to ask the right questions about our life's purpose and mission. We're also best positioned to understand the answers God may give us, and to recognize steps of faith he wants us to take.

6. Crises help us appreciate the resilience God has put within us, and strengthen our courage to take challenging steps essential to realizing our potential. One reason we hesitate to take vital steps of faith is that we fear failure too greatly. We imagine we won't be able to handle an experience of loss that might occur, and will never recover.

Yet, in fact, God has made us each far more resilient than we normally realize. A crisis can bring us face to face with this extraordinary fact of human nature. We discover that we are capable of picking up the pieces of our life and moving on. Over time we find that God works many miracles, healing our devastation and bringing fresh life out of the ashes. This discovery can revolutionize the way we think about risk, and enable us to entertain possibilities for our life we'd never have considered.

Greg Lukens, a friend of mine who was blinded at 13 in a tragic dirt bike accident, expressed it to me this way: "I stared adversity in the face, and asked what would be the worst that could happen if I lived a normal life. I realized I might trip over a rock from time to time, or fall in an occasional ditch, but that would be it. I decided I could handle these setbacks and wouldn't let the threat of them hold me back living fully." He went on to live a highly active life and to found a major audio supply company, which he

continues to manage. He has kept his life moving at full throttle toward dreams that are important to him, in spite of what most would term a serious handicap.

Greg's secret is a profound recognition of his own resilience -- one that goes much deeper than most of us experience. Here lies an important secret for each of us in unlocking our own potential. The appreciation of our resilience that grows out of a personal crisis can make an enormous difference, in finding the courage to take risks and in our ability to think big about our future.

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