

Anna Kerber

Dr. Gingrich

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Adversity and Talent

Adversity is defined as difficulties or misfortune, which causes many people think that it usually has negative effects. No one wants struggle, but it turns out that going through difficult times might actually help people more than it hurts them. The Roman poet Horace purports that “adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.” The quote means that, when people encounter hardships, it results in them getting skills that they would not have gotten if times were easy. It is clear that adversity pushes people’s boundaries, threatens them with pain or death if they don’t improve, and dissipates mental barriers holding back skills, all of which help develop new talents.

By pushing the boundaries of what people can do and know, adversity helps those people elicit new skills. The author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* states that “twelve thousand years ago, everybody on the earth was a hunter-gatherer; now almost all of us are farmers or else are fed by farmers” (Diamond 28). The transition from hunting and gathering was brought about by environmental instability and growing populations. The environmental problems at the beginning of the change from hunting and gathering made it increasingly difficult for bands of people to feed the whole group, and this was exacerbated by the slow but steady population growth due to previously prosperous conditions. Although death wasn’t imminent, it was becoming more difficult to survive. This caused people to feel the need to stretch the limits of their knowledge

and what they could do to find a solution. They eventually discovered that planting the right plants and harvesting them at the right times year after year could create a sustainable food source. However, the crops required the usually nomadic hunter-gatherers to stay in one place instead of searching for food. The ideas of staying in one place and the techniques for farming, which ended in subverting the upcoming food shortages, were brought about by people pushing themselves to develop new talents in critical thinking and advanced planting skills. During life-threatening situations, some people have been able to perform extraordinary feats that would have been impossible otherwise. For example, a woman was able to lift a BMW off her father in 2012 when her fear for his life pushed the boundaries of what she was physically capable of (Hadhazy). She was able to save his life, adrenaline from her love for her father and her need to save him giving her strength she wouldn't normally have. Imagine if someone you knew was in danger of being crushed by a car. Your adrenaline would be pumping and you would likely be willing to try almost anything to help them survive. The possibility of someone else's death or injury isn't the only type of adversity that elicits talent, however.

Adversity often comes with the threat of pain or death, and sometimes the only way to avoid that is to develop new talents. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, it is stated that "with the rise of chiefdoms around 75,000 years ago, people had to learn, for the first time in history, how to encounter strangers regularly without attempting to kill them" (Diamond 273). Chiefdoms brought together groups of people that normally lived separate lives with only their immediate families and would often travel on their own. Now, as large groups began to hunt and gather together, the likelihood of people meeting was greatly increased. Previously, people could fight each other a bit and then go away, either calling it a raw and hoping not to see the other person

again or just killing them. But in this new society, it was likely that those people would meet again, and then fight again. Moreover, if someone from one chiefdom killed someone from another chiefdom, that could pit larger groups of people against each other than what might have happened previously. That in itself would come with an increased likelihood of death or severe injury. All of that resulted in chiefdoms needing to learn how to get along, or else there would be large amounts of bloodshed. They had to learn the talent of negotiating with other groups and acting more peaceful if they wanted to survive. In *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, Abigail Williams is an already disgraced woman in Salem, Massachusetts, caught dancing in the woods and performing rituals. The people in the town believe that these rituals and dancing, which were seen as the devil's work, were what caused the sickness of a girl named Betty Parris, who was also involved in the action. Abigail realizes that she could be implicated for a crime against the church, so she decides to fake that she was being corrupted by the devil but has been cleared from his influence. For example, when Mary Warren testifies that Abigail is lying about being able to tell if someone is a witch, Abigail turns on Mary: "*looking about in the air, clasping her hands as though cold: I-I know not. A wind, a cold wind has come. Her eyes fall on Mary Warren*" (Miller 101). Here, Abigail is trying to save her reputation through the use of a red herring, saying that Mary is a witch, so Mary must be lying about Abigail to try and get her in trouble. At this point in the play, if Abigail is not able to convince the judges that Mary is lying, she will be punished greatly for all of the innocent people she has condemned. In order to keep up the charade, she has to pretend to see things that she can't actually see and act very dramatically to them. She also needs to manipulate the other girls into helping her and not letting her big secret out. She gets Mary Warren to plant a needle in a poppet to implicate Elizabeth

Proctor, who she hates, and gets the other girls to turn on Mary when she tries to tell the truth to the court. In order to avoid being hung or hurt, Abigail had to develop her acting and manipulation skills.

Mental barriers that push away skills tend to disappear during adversity, eliciting new talents and skills. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor is aware fairly early on that Abigail is lying about her devil-finding skills in order to save her own skin, and he wants to expose her for it. However, he has a mental barrier of shame and fear over acknowledging his adulterous actions (which would help prove Abigail's guilt). This barrier remains for a large part of the play because he doesn't know about the length Abigail has gone to and the fact that the adversity doesn't immediately affect him-- at least until his wife is accused. When he accuses Abigail of being a whore, he states "[Abigail] thinks to dance on my wife's grave! And well she might, for I thought of her softly" (Miller 102). Proctor is saying that Abigail has a motive to plant evidence that Elizabeth is a witch because Elizabeth kicked her due to her husband being adulterous with Abigail. The adversity being brought to him, and the danger his wife is in, causes his shame and fear to seem inconsequential, allowing him to confess that he cheated on his wife in order to save her and the other women Abigail convicted of witchcraft. This action would not have been possible if the danger involved in the situation had never eclipsed the reasons he was holding back. When his mental barriers to doing so broke, John Proctor was able to show his ability to be honest and staunch in his beliefs.

In the end, adversity does bring out talents and skills in people that might not have ever emerged had it not been for the stress of the situation and the necessity of developing said skills. Therefore, if a person is able to survive adversity, it is likely they were able to do so due to new

skills. The amount of difficulties throughout world history has definitely created skills, resulting in the world that we live in today. It will be interesting to see what talents future problems will bring.

Works Cited

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