

# Grace in the Gray Areas

BY KAREN KULLGREN

A basic tenet of Buddhism is that if something comes to your attention it has something to teach you, and I believe that is true. Not that I'm recommending looking for trouble as a path for spiritual growth (don't worry—trouble will find you).

I've been thinking about adversity a lot lately as I, my family, my community, my country and my world face imposing challenges to the economy, our livelihoods and our faith. I try to look at adversity as a beginning, not an end. However painful the challenges presented to us are, whether of catastrophic proportions like a death or a devastating curveball like a job loss, we do have choices in how we move forward. I don't want to diminish anyone's grief, anger, disappointment or fear, but while we cannot always control or determine a particular outcome, we can eventually control our own response.

What are the blessings of adversity? Adversity represents a rebirth, an opportunity for change and growth. The enemy of stasis, it challenges us to action, whether that means quiet changes in our personal lives or in the more public stands we take. Adversity reminds us of our riches, of the importance of gratitude for what we take for granted and of the preciousness of every moment we are given. Adversity teaches us mindfulness and the importance of paying attention. Adversity renews our compassion, as we learn what it is like to walk in another's shoes. Surviving adversity, and coming through to the other side, gives us hope and a renewed commitment to life. It teaches us acceptance and shows us the importance of friendship and community.

Adversity also makes us think. It makes us examine and reexamine our lives. The meaning of something bad happening may not be apparent until years later, if ever. When I have gone through a difficult experience, I try to find at least one good thing that came of it, big or small, and this usually comforts me. A surgery years ago, preceded by weeks of considerable pain, made me realize how much I loved my neighborhood and how much I could count on my friends and family, as they brought casseroles into my house, offered me rides, changed my dressings and cared

for my son. Leaving a "dream job" precipitated a reexamination of my life that led to redefining myself as a writer. A year in China, in a dark, industrial city where I plunged into depression and feared for my son's and my health in the polluted environment, brought me new friends from around the world. It made me aware of environmental health issues and helped me to appreciate every tree in my yard and community. It also made me fiercely protective of the rights and obligations of America's democratic tradition.

The lessons of my recent knee surgery are the freshest. Not being able to walk properly for many weeks was a wake-up call to take responsibility for my health, a reminder to be compassionate to both the obvious and hidden pain of others and to be tolerant of those who are slow-moving in our midst. I better appreciate the knees that supported each step I have taken throughout the world. And metaphorically, I learned about resilience. As Robin Morgan wrote in *Upstairs in the Garden*, "... Blessed be my knees that I may bend so as not to break."

There are other challenges I have faced or am facing, whose blessings I am still sorting out. But I am comforted that there must be meaning, whether or not it is revealed to me, and I try not to be mired in bitterness over the past but grounded in the present.

I finished writing most of this month's column before reading my daily newspaper. The business section talked about credit card companies putting the squeeze on people, the metro section had a story where local senior citizens remembered the Great Depression and its parallels to today, and the front page was devoted to world leaders convening about the global economic crisis. The dread overtakes me again. I worry for my present and future and those of my family and my country.

But I'm sticking to my story. Adversity can reveal to us our strength and the innate strength and optimism of humanity. Albert Camus wrote, "In the midst of winter, I found there was within me an invincible summer." I try to have faith in that, and this winter I am trying hard to find my inner summer.

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