

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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COMPROMISES

In a crisis, are you willing to make them?

By GLENN CAMPBELL

One of the hidden advantages of an economic crisis or any other kind of disaster is that it forces us to focus on what's really important. To survive, we will probably have to purge the things we never really needed in favor of the core things we do need. In the end, if we play our cards right, we could end up healthier and more fulfilled than if the crisis never happened.

The requirements of life are pretty simple: We need food, health and a reasonable measure of physical safety. Philosophically, we also need a meaningful personal mission and some control over our own destiny. If we have these things, everything else is negotiable. We may think we need other "essentials," but when forced to go without them, we will usually find a way.

The seeds of almost every crisis lie in the prosperity that came before. The tragedy of good times is that they encourage us to take on more crap than we can ultimately support: more possessions, more debt, more obligations and more arbitrary expectations about what the proper life should be. After a period of good fortune, people are burdened by so much excess baggage, both physical and psychological, they can hardly move.

A crisis tends to strip all of that away. We are forced to make hard choices about the things we need and don't need, and after a painful transition, we may end up with a life that is leaner, more direct and ultimately more satisfying than the one

we had before.

Some people are broken by crisis. Their spirit never recovers. Others are ultimately strengthened by it and come out the other side much more productive than they were before. What is the difference between the two? It's a matter of attitude.

Those who prosper approach the crisis as an opportunity. They say, "I didn't ask for this, but now that it is happening, I'm going to take advantage of it." You can't keep these people down, because every bad thing you throw at them gets turned to their benefit.

There can be great freedom in control being taken out of our hands, which is what a crisis usually does. For example, few of us would want to lose our job, have our home foreclosed on or have to file for bankruptcy, but if these things are forced upon us, we might be better off in the long term, getting closer to the simple things that are most important. Without a crisis, we might never have passed the threshold of pain necessary to make these changes.

A crisis often allows us to make dramatic course corrections that would be unthinkable in good times. Instead of a dull, straight-line path through life, you may end up with a much more interesting and purposeful journey—if you take advantage of the opportunity.

A crisis can be thought of a wormhole through space. Instead of travelling 20 light years by slow space ship to reach your destination, you could jump through a wormhole and get there much faster.

The only disadvantage of wormholes is the devastation they wreck when they appear in your universe. Everything you cared about and thought was important may be sucked away. There is nothing pleasant about it, and there may be times when no solution seems possible.

Just like the unrealistic euphoria of good times, the worry of bad times is rarely as bad as it first seems. Once a few things go bad, we start planning for the worst-case scenario where everything goes bad. Paranoia starts ruling our actions, which often makes things even worse.

But along with the calamities, unexpected opportunities are also bound to appear, and when they do, you have to be ready to jump into them. The key preparation is to purge all those things you don't need. Do you really need this obligation, that possession? People have always told you those things are necessary but are they really? If you are truly creative, you can often find a better work-around.

The greatest benefit of a crisis is the purging it encourages. It gives you a chance to get back to basics, to what's really important. If you're smart, you'll take the hint and get rid of everything not of immediate practical value. Instead of travelling with eighteen steamer trunks, you should be passing through life with one carry-on.

The real privilege is to be passing through life at all, not what you are carrying with you.

—G.C.

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