

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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The Responsibilities of the Victim

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No matter how carefully we plan our lives, bad things are going to happen. People close to us are going to die. We or people we care about are going to get terrible diseases. We are going to become the victims of crime or disfiguring accidents. These things are not anomalies. They are part of the normal course of life.

The chance of any one disaster happening is usually low, but when you add up all the possible things that can go wrong, you have to face reality: You are going to encounter some major unanticipated catastrophes between now and the end of your life. Are you ready for them?

Almost always, the tragedy was preventable. In retrospect, there was usually something you or someone else could have done to avoid any bad event, but the issue is moot now. You can't undo a traffic accident or prevent a heart attack after it has occurred. You can only adapt to the new course of events and find some sort of strength in it.

Sooner or later, you are going to become a victim, so you might as well decide right now what that means, before it happens. Will you handle victimhood gracefully, or will you make things worse?

In the legal system, there is a lot of talk about "victim rights." You hardly hear any mention of "victim responsibility." This concept may be hard to grasp at first. A victim can't just be a victim and expect to overcome the disaster. Within himself, he has to take responsibility for what happened, even if he didn't cause it.

This doesn't mean the perpetrator should get off the hook. It means that regardless of the cause of the disaster, the victim has to accept responsibility for its future outcome. Thereby, he stops being a victim and starts being captain

of his fate. It is the difference between being tossed around helplessly by a storm and taking control of your ship. There's no sense in ranting about the injustice of the storm; you just have to meet the challenge.

Misfortune, regardless of its cause, does not give you the right to act like a child, to throw a temper tantrum, to hold a grudge, to demand that someone else fix the problem for you. Being at the center of the storm, it is your responsibility to return the world to a state of equilibrium.

Inside any misfortune is some kernel of good fortune, some silver lining, and your job is to find it. Instead of dwelling on the assets you've lost, you must focus on the ones you still have. If you look hard enough, you will probably find neglected skills you weren't even aware of. Maybe you will even find a simpler, deeper, more satisfying life than you had before.

If one of your dominant skills or activities is taken away, that gives others an opportunity to bloom. If you're a runner who loses his legs or an artist who loses his eyes, you are going to have to develop other skills. It's frightening to be pushed abruptly into a new world like that, but it can also be a fantastic opportunity for growth. Maybe the old assets were holding you back. Once we find success, we tend to become trapped there in suspended animation until some catastrophe comes along to liberate us. Every forest needs a forest fire occasionally to clear out the dead wood, and maybe this is it!

You would never think like this if your spouse were dying of cancer, but after they have died, you are free to reposition and realign yourself, to make the most of the situation no matter what it may be.

Victimhood is a disease you have to escape from as quickly as possible. You

have to take control and move ahead. Anger, grief and grievances have to be left behind.

If someone did something bad to you, you may be responsible for bringing them to justice, but this is different from revenge. If you seek revenge, you are accepting victimhood and choosing to be defined by it. Justice, however, is more of an abstract concept. It's like you are engaged in a contract; a transaction has been initiated, and it is your responsibility to complete the transaction.

It is not necessarily your job to show up in court and argue for the maximum punishment, as most victims do. It may be your job to argue for leniency! The one certain thing is that it's your duty to participate in justice, to try your best to make it work in this one transaction you have been entrusted with.

There is nothing gained by hating the person who did this to you. You have a responsibility to understand them and to find compassion for them, even if you have to send them to prison. That's part of the therapeutic process of taking control.

You may or may not believe in God, but when disaster strikes, it is useful to imagine there is one. You ask yourself, "What is He trying to teach me?" and you try your best to figure out the plan. I'm not saying there is a plan. I'm only saying you should act like there is. Whenever something bad happens to you, you have to believe that there's a purpose to it, that it was meant to turn you into a better person.

That little delusion can get you through just about anything. What's the plan here? What's the test? Unless you care to give up on life altogether, that's the only route you can take.

—G.C.

For Darcy, 1970-2008

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