
Trouble, Trouble, Toil & Trouble

IN SPITE OF THE BEST BLUEPRINTS, things don't always work the way they were intended to. It seems we cannot run from trouble or avoid difficulties.

We spend a lot of time planning and taking preventive measures to avoid trouble, as indeed we should. Despite our best plans, however, trouble finds us. There is a reason for trouble, for pressure, for difficulties, for the hassles of life. The uncomfortable truth is they are part of God's design. But when we encounter them, they can leave us frustrated, confused and discouraged. It's true in families, and it's true in business.

As a teenager, I had an encounter with trouble that helped me understand how difficulties should and should not be handled. The lesson has served me well throughout my work career.

Trouble Finds Us

I had just turned thirteen, and I was enjoying a short but very

special vacation with my dad at my uncle's summer cottage in Canada's north woods, six hundred miles from home. There, trouble found us when an incident between Dad and my uncle, his older brother Harold, erupted into such a heated dispute that our brief vacation was about to come to an abrupt and bitter end.

It began innocently enough. Uncle Harold got the notion that his young nephew might like to look over his favorite playing cards which featured—you guessed it—a gallery of well-endowed naked women. As I was gawking at pose after enticing pose, Dad walked into the room, eager to get out on the lake to fish for large-mouth bass.

Maybe it was my furtive glance and clumsy effort to hide the cards I was holding—or maybe it was the uncanny instinct a father has when his kid is at risk. Quickly taking in the situation, Dad exploded: “Harold, how could you do a lousy thing like this?”

Harold was stunned. “Reg, get off your high horse. He's a young man. You can't shield him forever!”

“Pictures of pulchritude” were part of Harold's world. He was an artist, the highly esteemed architect who had designed some of Canada's most stunning homes, office buildings and public gardens. To him the nude was art, something of great beauty. Not so, countered Dad. This was raw pornography. And here was his own brother, nearly sixty—not some misguided youngster—callously exposing his son, John, to a tawdry and shameful display.

“Pack your bags, John,” Dad fumed. “We're going home.”

A few minutes later we crawled into our small cedar boat. With a single pull, Dad started the outboard motor and we pulled away from the dock. I bit into my lip, attempting to mask my intense

disappointment. Why did this have to happen? Why did this very special outing with Dad have to abort in a rage of tempers and harsh words?

Making Things Right

A hundred yards from the shore I turned from the distant horizon to glance back at Dad. Normally he would be letting me run the boat. But this morning he was in charge, though I was sure I saw tears moistening his tanned face. Suddenly, with a determined yank on the tiller handle, he said grimly, “John, we’re going back.” I was sure he’d forgotten something important.

In the distance, I could see Uncle Harold standing at the cottage window, staring out at the lake. As the boat drew nearer, he began trudging down to the dock to find out what had gone wrong. Then I saw something else. In those brief moments, Dad’s intense, righteous anger had met with an equally powerful and deep love for his brother. The former was giving way to the latter. Dad was coming back to make things right. Too many years. Too many shared experiences. Too much was at stake to allow this incident to become a festering wound, one that might never heal. Better to make amends now.

My head still swirling, I watched in amazement as these two forceful, strong-willed brothers met on the dock and reached out at the same moment into a prolonged embrace. Few words were spoken. Few were needed. They understood. Never again would Harold violate Reg’s fatherly care for his son. Never again would he underestimate Dad’s intense sense of right and wrong or risk such a breach.

We unloaded the boat and were now able to complete our vacation—the air wonderfully cleared and the seeds of a vital life lesson deeply sown.

Dad’s passion for his beliefs had caused him to risk fracture with the eldest of his five brothers. Yet, without compromising that passion, he had found a place for forgiveness and reconciliation. By God’s grace, he faced the problem and conquered it, not the other way around. And in the process, he left an indelible lesson with his son—that we cannot turn our back on trouble. Perhaps his example helped provide the endurance I would need years later when faced with seemingly insurmountable difficulties in my business and in other areas of my life.

Trouble—Even in the Bible

The Bible is remarkably candid, describing the difficulties, temptations and trials men and women have faced throughout history. Not one of those whose lives are portrayed in the Scriptures avoided problems.

The Genesis account of the first human beings makes it clear that the difficulties we encounter were not God’s original intent. He created Adam and Eve in an ideal situation where they enjoyed intimate fellowship with their Creator. When Adam and Eve sinned through disobedience, this relationship was permanently altered. All creation, including the human family, came under a curse characterized by toil and trouble.

Jesus came to begin the restoration of all that was lost by Adam and Eve—a process that will one day be complete. The book of Revelation peers into the future: “And God shall wipe away every

tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

But that day has not yet come. Nor can we, through our best efforts, achieve heaven on earth. Jesus was emphatic on this point as he spoke to his disciples: "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The word in this passage translated *tribulation*, or *trouble*, is used elsewhere to describe crushing grapes or olives in a press!

God, in seeking to redeem all that could be redeemed, began using this same trouble for his purposes and our good. James pointed the early church toward a redemptive view of struggles when he wrote, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

I, for one, am not inclined to count trouble as joy. I fuss, I worry, I try to work through problems with my own brute force. But I am gradually coming to see that God is right there in the midst of the problem, wanting to show us the way through difficulties—not around them—and in the process to teach us more about his ways.

Trouble Finds Us at Work

There has been no shortage of trials in my own business career, and I'm sure the same is true for you. Incidents mentioned earlier—including my dad's sudden death, the devastating plant fire and the union organization attempt—stretched my natural capacities to the limit and mercifully took me beyond, into a

deeper walk of faith. Over the years, we've encountered major industrial accidents, employee problems, product liability issues and financial pressures.

As we look back, we can see how each of the problems has had a redemptive value. We can chart our company's maturity and stamina not by what happened on the mountaintops, but by the lessons we learned in the valleys.

Such was the case when the Arab States embargoed oil in 1979, with the resulting run-up in the price of all petroleum-based products, including the heating oil used by our residential and commercial burner customers. To some degree, everyone was affected. You may recall the long lines at service stations during this period when gasoline could only be purchased on alternate days.

That crisis had a frightening impact on our business. Who needs an oil burner if there's no oil? Most of our major customers severely curtailed purchases, and some stopped buying altogether. We were especially vulnerable because we had just completed a large expansion of our facilities. One of our major competitors became so discouraged that they pulled back most of their product development and even their selling efforts. To them, there seemed to be no way out.

A Positive Response

In our efforts to see the large picture, and after consultation and prayer, I concluded we should take a different tack. Instead of retreating, we would become more aggressive. We not only stepped up new product development, but we sent some of our

management team out on the speaking circuit, encouraging our customers to see beyond the immediate problem and even take advantage of it by replacing older, inefficient heating systems with modern, fuel-saving units. The idea took hold. We sold hundreds of thousands of replacement units, enabling us to hold our production levels and keep our entire workforce active through the dark days of the crisis. We actually emerged from this traumatic time even stronger, becoming the leader in our industry—a position we’ve been able to maintain ever since.

Though we have often had difficulty seeing God’s purposes in the midst of the problems we’ve faced over the years, hindsight has revealed his prevailing design and intentions. Over and over, we have seen the truth of what the prophet Isaiah said, that God’s ways are not our ways, but are infinitely higher.

Difficulty is God’s instrument. Its lessons can be embraced or shunned, but eventually they must be learned. In God’s economy, there seems to be no other way.