

## **Living Vulnerable: A Christian Therapist's Response to Crisis**

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As a city, we are still reeling from the effects of Tropical Storm Allison. Though the visible signs of the flood's impact are not as apparent as they were when streets were piled high with debris, families continue to suffer from the physical and emotional impact of being displaced.

As a nation, we have responded to the tragic and unfathomable crisis of September 11 in ways that represent the best of what coping is. We've sought to comfort and sustain those who have suffered the greatest losses. We have wept and grieved--at times as if we would never reach the end of our tears.

We, the 18 therapists and staff that make up the UBA Center for Counseling, know that the grieving is not over. Anchored in Christ, we offer assistance in healing and growing through crisis and chaos.

Several years ago as I prepared for a Bible study lesson, I was struck by one of the commentator's observations. He noted that the Chinese word for "crisis" consisted of two symbols--one representing "danger" and the other, "opportunity." As both a Christian and a psychologist, I found the implications of this derivative intriguing.

Every crisis, loss, or traumatic event that we experience, individually or collectively, calls into question the underlying structures by which we make sense of the world and our place within it. As very young children, we draw conclusions and instinctively create emotional and cognitive paradigms that allow us to derive some sense of control and order in a chaotic world. Often, we are well into adulthood before we are able to articulate these internal defining structures and their impact upon the way we live and relate to others.

Whether we know it or not, our early life experiences and what we observe of our parents' responses to the world they live in, become symbolic building materials. We then construct our unique filters through which we interpret life, our value within it, and the role of significant others in meeting our inborn needs for security, belonging, and love. We may convince ourselves that we know what we need to know for life to be both predictable and good. But, more often than not, our belief systems are filled with the flaws and distortions that are inherent in people who can only "see through the mirror darkly." Without realizing it, we continue to interpret each new experience of life through lenses as distorted as funhouse mirrors.

Crisis is the means by which these automatic and often unspoken operating systems are brought into our awareness. Through crisis and the resulting chaos, we become empowered to identify the faulty beliefs that deny us the abundant life for which we are created. When our "worlds" are turned upside down, we are enabled to move beyond thinking, speaking, and responding as a child, as Paul identified in I Corinthians.. We begin to confront the false assumptions that have previously seemed reasonable--for example, "God only loves me if I'm good," "I can protect myself and my family from pain and danger by doing the right things," "Bad things only happen to bad people."

Our desire for predictability, order, and control is a powerful driving force within us. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, lived in lush, secure circumstances with all of their needs met generously *and* the daily companionship of the One who created them out of His immense love. Yet they were enticed into losing this communion by their fear of vulnerability and grasping efforts for control and power. And now we continue to struggle to impose structure and predictability upon our world in order that we may prevent becoming vulnerable.

Crisis, almost always, is what brings individuals, couples and families into counseling or therapy. Our clients come to us raw, wounded, vulnerable and often exhausted from the failure of their best efforts to cope with a world that cannot be made predictable and safe. Often the crises that initiate a request for help are clearly painful and disruptive: death, divorce, job loss, illness, an inability to respond effectively to the demands of life at work, at home, or at school. At times, the normal, but still painful process of growth within relationships generates a crisis experience.

Feelings of fear, anger, confusion, anxiety, exhaustion, emotional paralysis, sadness, inadequacy, hopelessness, and discouragement are symptomatic of our human response to crisis. Like the disciples who struggled to understand a Kingdom founded upon worldly impoverishment and the crucifixion of their Lord, we flounder in our faulty assumptions and conclusions. Our immature belief structures--and armor--lie shattered around us, and we are naked and exposed.

We may associate the "danger" in crisis with the painful brokenness of this emotional experience. But, in fact, the real danger exists in our human efforts to interpret crisis experiences through our old, distorted paradigms.

So what is the "opportunity" in crisis? It is the chance to identify old and faulty structures for viewing self and the world, to clear out the debris of broken illusions, and to make way for the construction of new wineskins. One of the most effective ways of responding to crisis is to seek out partners for the journey. Christian counselors and psychotherapists train to become partners is just such a process providing resources and an environment that promote growth in the midst of vulnerability. Christian therapists understand that grieving is an essential part of the journey to accept and rebuild. They provide tools and skills for the reconstruction process out of their belief that we were created for prosperity (from His perspective) and abundance.

In these post-flood, post-September 11 days, we continue to celebrate the lives of those who respond to crisis by putting their own lives on the line. We also have begun to reexamine our lives. We are beginning to understand that transformation is generated out of chaos, not out of safety and routine. We are tangling anew with the paradox that true life comes out of death--that each loss (whether the loss of life, of relationship, of job, or of a belief about ourselves or the world) is pregnant with opportunity.

Cutline: Center for Counseling administrator Kathy Galvan provides insights into coping with crises such as the recent flooding in Houston and the terrorists attacks on our country. Quoting Ellen Goodman, a syndicated columnist appearing in

newspapers around the nation, who wrote "I have never been especially impressed by the heroics of the people convinced that they are about to change the world. I am more awed by the heroism of those who are willing to struggle to make one small difference after another," Galvan adds, "We at the UBA Center for Counseling are anchored to the One who does, in fact, change the world. And we honor the individuals, families, and churches that allow us to partner with them in crisis so that together we make "small" differences...one step at a time."