

Horrible People as Teachers?

10 Powerful Lessons for Personal Growth

By Elly V. Darwin, M.Ed., NCC

I hate crises (who doesn't?), but I've come to embrace them. Not while being ground up in their belly, of course—but in the process of emerging and rebuilding after a horrible life event, I've invariably been able to see some good. The good manifests differently depending on the nature of the crisis. Sometimes it's barely noticeable growth and maturity, or perhaps a magnificent aha moment, or somewhere in between, but the good is there.

People who are not on a spiritual path serve as teaching devices for those who are. This realization popped into my head one day many months after having been chewed up and spit out by The Boss From Hell. It was an aha moment for sure, so profound and so fitting that the exact instant is imprinted on my brain: riding in the car with my husband. I could go back to that very spot on the pavement today, many years hence, and say, "this is where I was when that thought hit me."

This article isn't about TBFH—we all deserve better—but I will say this: Evil is a word I don't use often and I don't take lightly; she was evil. (OK, got that out—breathe!) My experience working for her was devastating. It was my dream-job-turned-to-shit. I was left reeling, heartbroken, angry, withdrawn, and

deeply depressed. I'd been through some bad things, but this experience showed me what the phrase "shaken to your very core" feels like. Virtually all my core beliefs about anything good in the world had been challenged, if not shattered.

Something inside me told me I'd eventually get through it, that I would smile again and trust again, but it was hard. Thus began—not for the first time in my life, but in an entirely different way—a renewed process of trying to get back to the true me.

I pulled a book on spirituality from my shelf and vowed that I would read from it anytime I felt angry, hopeless or helpless. I would plow through a paragraph or a page. No particular agenda other than that: just read. Sometimes I would read a phrase, then sit and think about it for a few minutes before continuing. I did this almost daily—at times, two or three times a day, for maybe six or seven months before drawing the conclusion that it wasn't doing any good. I still felt betrayed, still pissed off, still robbed. But a deep part of me felt I was in a life-or-death, prevail-or-succumb struggle for my very soul, so I kept my promise to myself. More months passed. I was outwardly functioning, but inwardly just as shattered. I kept reading, pointless as it seemed.

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And then one day that life-changing phrase hit me like a bolt of lightning. Just riding along in the car, and *bam!* ***People who are not on a spiritual path serve as teaching devices for those who are.*** I felt like I had been trying to put together a giant jigsaw puzzle, trying to make sense of crazy stuff. Who was on whose

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side? Who betrayed whom at what point? Why did no one tell me such-and-such? How did TBFH know such-and-such (that was shared in confidence)? Why did...? Who did...? How did...? I could get little sections, but so many pieces were missing. Now I had the most important piece and, swoosh, the puzzle flew into place.

I've been on a spiritual path for many years and was trying my best to see this crisis through a spiritual lens. I kept forgiving and sending her and others around her prayers for healing, but why was I still so hurt and resentful? Now I had my answer: I was putting the puzzle together all wrong. In fact, I was working on the wrong puzzle entirely. Resolution had nothing to do personalities, behavior, events, or organizational dynamics. The issue wasn't how could she be so despicable. It was what did I need to learn from the experience.

That brought about a major shift in my focus and my healing. I began to see her not so much as a cruel monster (even though she routinely did cruel things) but as a spiritual messenger sent to help me learn. Not all spiritual messengers are cute little cherubs, and not all lessons are fun. If you want to develop tough guards and tackles on a professional football team, do you have them practice guarding and tackling 40-pound 10-year-olds?

Instead of questioning how God could let sweet-natured, hard-working, little ol' me get steamrolled by this horrid creature, I began to evaluate not how she and her cohorts behaved, but how I handled my side of things that occurred. I remain proud of certain things: I had stood up for other employees who were being mistreated. I had refused to carry out certain instructions that were illegal, unethical, or detrimental to others. And when I felt I had no other recourse I ultimately became a whistleblower. Such infractions landed me squarely on her enemy list, of course, and she retaliated.

In his famous "Last Lecture" at Carnegie Mellon University, the late professor Randy Pausch admonished his audience, "Recognize when you're in a pissing contest, and get out of it as soon as you can." I didn't get out, and that took its toll.

I continued to do two things that were not in my best interests: First of all, I clung to the fantasy that this was still my dream job—if only I could get her to change. But the more I continued to try to work with her and make peace with her, while still standing up for what I believed was the right thing to do, the worse she treated me. The second thing, though, is really where the lasting lessons lay: The more things did not go well, the more frustrated I got. And the more frustrated I got, the more I allowed myself to stray from my own highest principles. She was clearly not on a spiritual path, but in trying to resist her, I was allowing her to pull me off of mine.

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— Randy Pausch

Wow, what a lesson my experience with TBFH taught me! The lesson was brutal, but it ultimately made me stronger. Like an alcoholic who will never again touch another

drink, I will never again allow another person or set of circumstances to pull me away from my highest purpose.

The following are some of the lessons I came away from that experience with. They're not new—in fact, I was not only previously aware of them, I've even taught some of them. Now they've been forged, hammered, and galvanized into my being with renewed purpose. My sense is that they are not specific to me but are actually fairly universal. They are:

1. **Know the truth; see the truth.** That was a hostile, untenable environment (obvious clues: prevailing fear, low morale, and high turnover). The sooner I had dropped my fantasy that it would ever be anything different, the better off I would have been.
2. **Honor my skill set.** Huh? This lesson was gleaned from a tearful outburst to my husband (who so lovingly supported me through the crisis) one day in the aftermath. "I didn't have the right tools to survive there," I sobbed. "I'm not mean enough. I'm not sneaky and sleazy. I don't know how to stab people in the back. I don't know how to set people up. I don't know how to...." True, my skill set was no match, and I thank God for that.
3. **Don't fan the flames.** When the building is on fire, get out. Don't light another match, and don't argue about who's responsible for fire safety. The more I tried to put out fires, the more I fanned the flames. The longer I stayed in the pissing contest, the more I got pissed on. The more I attempted to fix things that were unfixable, the more broken I became.
4. **Listen to my heart.** This is a major pillar of my life, and yet I was so blinded by the impressive title on my business card that I stopped listening.

Almost from day one my heart was telling me this was not a healthy situation for me.

5. **My job is to be my best self.** Period. It is not to change others. It is not to prove others wrong in order to prove myself right. In fact, I don't need to *prove* myself right, I just need to *set* myself right by being true to myself and doing the right thing. The rest will work out however it is supposed to.
6. **Spring follows winter.** That's the natural order of life. Once a nadir has been reached, the only way is up, and following the coldest, darkest, bleakest season, things do come back to life.
7. **I am in charge of my healing.** I was badly hurt, no question. But I knew I was faced with a choice: remain a bitter victim or heal and rediscover joy. That horrid experience is indelibly there, but it doesn't define me.
8. **Forgive.** "70 times 7" if necessary. Forgiveness doesn't condone or excuse what others do; it liberates me from emotional bondage to them.
9. **Never, ever, veer off my spiritual path.** Doing so not only weakens me spiritually, but physically, mentally, and emotionally as well. As soon as I realize I've taken a detour, I must do whatever it takes to get back on the path ASAP.
10. **Compassion nullifies judgement.** I had often pondered how awful a life would have to be to bring someone to the conclusion that everyone she encounters is either an enemy or a soldier to put to use fighting her enemies. I'm not saying this sarcastically but as a point of compassion: I cannot imagine a greater definition of a living hell on earth than waking up

every morning and going to bed every night being her. TBFH wasn't born hateful, spiteful, mean, conniving, coldhearted and cruel; she became that way. Clearly, she suffers from a huge love deficit.

We can learn from horrible people and horrible circumstances. We each have unique, yet universal, lessons to learn from people who do despicable things. Notice that none of the lessons gleaned above had anything directly to do with TBFH. Why? Because she was merely the teacher, the messenger sent to show me what I needed to learn, relearn, or reinforce for my own growth.

Which brings to mind my final point: The Buddhists say that when the student is ready,

the teacher appears. Key word: *appears*. We don't always go looking, and we don't always get to choose, and sometimes we don't even realize we're ready. But anytime we are presented with The [fill in the blank: Boyfriend, Girlfriend, Spouse, In-law, Neighbor, Boss, Co-worker—whoever] From Hell, the reason they are in our midst is that it's time to learn. Learning is a gift. And if we learn well, we grow. Maybe despicable people aren't from Hell after all.



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