



## When Bad Things Happen to Good People: Living Well in the Midst of Suffering

As a pediatrician, I have encountered both the healthiest of children and the most devastating of cases. And while I expected to encounter tragedy, I could never have anticipated what it would feel like to herald death.

It was late overnight, well past midnight when I first encountered her. Charged with caring for the oncology unit, I sat quietly awaiting her arrival. In a world full of chaos, these hours of darkness often felt like a sea of tranquility, weary eyes graced with a momentary calm with the threat of turbulence perpetually waiting around the corner. Upon arrival at my shift, I had been warned of her coming; she would be accompanied by her parents, our sole task was to keep her “comfortable.” No clinical interventions would be necessary: our only job was to keep the floodgates open, allowing the swelling in her brain to progress as her family whispered their farewells.

How does one look a parent in the eyes and wish his or her child a comfortable, painless death? How does one stand by and witness suffering that a soul so young with innocence could not possibly have earned? I had no idea. I nudged open the door to her room, suspended in the moment’s hesitation and acutely aware of the transgression I did not want to make. I had come to welcome her goodbye, to begin the penning of her epilogue.

Medical training can be quite grueling, from the long hours in the hospital to the sheer volume of requisite knowledge. However, while these are certainly challenges in their own right, what few will admit is the tribulation of suffering—questioning why bad things happen to good people and despite it all, finding a way to live and love generously, even when one feels immutably small.

As an early trainee, I felt the heavy weight of these inequalities. It seemed pointless to ruminate on a why to which no answer could ever be satisfactory. And yet, the compulsion was relentless. But wondering why only led to a deeper sense of discomfort with the hard realities of the world—a slight to the idealists amongst us. The only relief seemed to be a shift in perspective, foregoing the *why* for *when*.

In “*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,” rabbi Harold Kushner argues that accepting that bad things happen to good people is pivotal to moving forward meaningfully through suffering. The shift from why to when allows us to tap into a deeper well of resilience rather than succumbing to suffocation:

*People who pray for miracles usually don't get miracles, any more than children who pray for bicycles, good grades, or good boyfriends get them as a result of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayer answered.<sup>1</sup>*

Accepting *when* rather than wondering *why* is empowering. It shifts us into a more productive contemplation on *how* to live our lives and refocuses our attention on the things we can do to live with dignity, grace, and courage. It's a sentiment writer Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer captures poignantly in her poem “What I Can Do:”

*So I can't save the world—  
can't save even myself,  
can't wrap my arms around  
every frightened child, can't  
foster peace among nations,  
can't bring love to all who  
feel unlovable.*

*So I practice opening my heart  
right here in this room and being gentle  
with my insufficiency. I practice  
walking down the street heart first.  
And if it is insufficient to share love,  
I will practice loving anyway.*

...

*One willing heart can't stop a war.  
One willing heart can't feed all the hungry.  
And sometimes, daunted by a task too big,  
I tell myself what's the use of trying?  
But today, the invitation is clear:  
to be ridiculously courageous in love.  
To open the heart like a lilac in May,  
knowing freeze is possible  
and opening anyway.<sup>2</sup>*

The inherent inequities of the world challenge the idealism we all carry, even the staunchest realists amongst us—a remnant belief from childhood that goodness should be preventive. However, while goodness might not always preclude suffering, I do believe that it is protective—that a good life is one led with hearts wide open, living and loving as passionately as we can amidst the chaos of it all.

*“Those who live passionately teach us how to love.  
Those who love passionately teach us how to live.”<sup>3</sup>  
—Paramahansa Yogananda*

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## References

1. Kushner, Harold. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Schocken Books, 1981.
2. Trommer, Rosemerry Wahtola. “What I Can Do.” <https://ahundredfallingveils.com>, 2020.
3. Yogananda, Paramahansa. n.p., n.d.