



LIFE THROWS CURVEBALLS

- Ruth Rowse

As a junior at Wellesley, I read *The Plague* by Albert Camus and even wrote the date, "Jan. 1969," inside the cover. I never dreamed I would reread it 51 years later during a pandemic. Now some of us have lost loved ones to Covid-19 and, what's worse, they had to die alone. We can no longer even have traditional funerals. Life as we know it--hugging each other, socializing, flying on planes, feeling safe in grocery stores and attending cultural, religious, and sporting events—may be only a memory for a long time. Our 50th reunion is just one of the many losses we all are experiencing. And people less privileged are suffering even greater consequences.

Curveballs come at you unexpectedly. Whether you have lost a child or a career or a friendship, life throws curveballs at all of us. They can take many forms--a natural disaster, financial blow, freak accident, devastating diagnosis, addiction, divorce, suicide, abuse, or violence to name a few. Curveballs cause us to become more aware of the fragility of life. They often move us to more fully appreciate our lives and lead to greater strength and meaning. They force us to change course, develop new skills and create a new story.

I was working as a therapist in a college counseling office in upstate NY on 9/11. Many of our students were from New York City and lost family members in the Twin Towers. The emotional and physical devastation of that curveball was immeasurable. But Covid-19 is catastrophic in its global reach, number of lives lost, financial impact, the uncertainty of not knowing when it will end, and the incompetence of the U.S. response. As I write this, our national Covid-19 death toll is equal to that of 9/11 every day and a half.

When I offered to lead a small group discussion for our reunion, I was hoping classmates would share stories of how they coped with the curveballs life had thrown at them. I planned to talk about a major conflict in my family of origin. One of my sisters and I had to get a restraining order against a family member. This caused a painful rupture in the family. Although we ultimately recovered, some families have wounds that do not heal. I owe my survival to my very supportive husband, several amazing friends, and other family members whom I called frequently. I also tried to take care of myself by exercising, keeping a gratitude journal and continuing with my writing group from afar.

At our reunion, I also hoped to talk about how we can become more resilient. Since we can't have this discussion in person, I have turned to one of my favorite authors who has shaped my thinking.

In her new book, *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing as We Age*, Mary Pipher writes that women our age can become more resilient and learn the skills to adapt to anything. She lists five skills necessary for resilience:

1. *Understand yourself*: Women are good at nurturing others, but often have difficulty learning how to take care of themselves. It is important to listen to our own voices about what we really need, find useful ways to express hurt and anger and get comfortable with setting limits.
2. *Make conscious choices*: Pipher believes that happiness is a choice and we can learn skills to increase our happiness. We don't have total control over our lives, but we do have choices. We can learn to revise our expectations, take things less personally, be less reactive and challenge distorted thoughts.
3. *Create community*: In her earlier book, *In the Shelter of Each Other*, Pipher makes the case that our culture of materialism and violence has eroded our sense of community. "We are educated by the culture to believe that security comes from money, but really, what saves most of us is love." Reaching out to other people can be healing. Taking action with others to solve problems is a good antidote to despair.
4. *Change your story*: As Salmon Rushdie says: "Those who do not have the power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, joke about it, and change it, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts." Pay attention to the narratives you tell yourself. Even traumatic experiences can be revisited by asking: "How did it make me stronger? "What did I learn from that experience?"
5. *Cultivate gratitude*: Take the time to notice the many things you have to be grateful for. For example, I am grateful that the virus has forced me to slow down. I love Pipher's phrasing: "The only real time is noticed time." Gratitude is a habit, not a moral injunction, and practice can strengthen it.

Other writers who study happiness agree with Pipher that strong relationships are essential. For example, Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard social psychologist, states that the best predictors of human happiness are relationships and the amount of time people spend with friends and family. My guess is that most of us from the class of '70 know instinctively that this is important.

Other researchers talk about how suffering often teaches people the importance of kindness. When people have lost a great deal, they frequently have a greater appreciation for what is left. Those who become stronger after trauma often develop a greater capacity for compassion and sense of purpose in their lives. This is sometimes called "post-traumatic growth." Adversity can help us find more meaning in our lives. Is it too much to hope that the trauma of Covid-19 could lead to greater compassion, and perhaps some governmental action, for those who don't have access to health care?

We may not be able to control whether we have a traditional reunion, but we can become more resilient by strengthening our relationships and sharing our stories. As Isak Dinesen said, "All sorrows can be borne if they can be put into a story." All of

us feel hopeless at times, but tragedies can lead us to trust and connect with others. Resilient people look for ways to connect with others and create stories that give their lives meaning and purpose.

Ruth Rowse is a retired clinical social worker and attorney. She now lives in Ann Arbor, MI, with her husband, Chris Dahl. He is the older brother of our classmate Mary-Lib Dahl, who died in 2015. After retiring from Nazareth College in Rochester, NY, where she was Assistant Director of Counseling, Ruth began memoir writing and currently is in three online writing groups.