

Fortunate Errors

True story. David Foster, one of the world's most successful music producers and winner of 16 Grammy awards, had been working late into the night with singer Michael Bolton in a Hollywood studio. It was 2am when they finally left, and Foster headed home to Malibu, the glamorous beach community of greater Los Angeles.

Zooming over a hill along the dark and empty Pacific Coast Highway on that beautiful summer night, Foster suddenly saw a man wildly waving his arms in the middle of his lane. It was too late to stop or swerve, and the car slammed directly into the poor fellow. Foster dialled 911 Emergency and pleaded for immediate help. "I think I have just killed someone," he frantically said.

He then leapt out of his car and ran to the man who was curled in a foetal position on the road, blood everywhere. As Foster reached down to touch the body, the man's hand moved slightly. He was alive! Ambulances soon arrived on the scene and rushed the man to the hospital. There he was put on a trach, and his spleen was removed. He had also had a stroke on his right side, and his left femur was broken. As it happened, the man who had been struck by David Foster's car was Broadway and film star Ben Vereen (only in Malibu, right?).

But here's the thing. When Vereen arrived at the hospital, the medical team scanned his body for injuries and discovered a preexisting subdural hematoma. He had been bleeding in the brain prior to the accident, which is why he was in a state of confusion and wandering on a dark highway in the middle of the night. The doctors said he would have been dead from the hematoma within a few hours had he not been taken to the hospital. The accident, which necessitated the body scan, had saved his life. Three months to the day later, Vereen rang Foster, and said, "Man, that must have been one of your greatest hits ever."

Perhaps each of our own lives have a fair share of saving grace that has come the hard way. Something

terrible happens, and at the time there was no good to be found in it. It seemed an obvious catastrophe and any attempt to put a happy spin on it would have been pathetically Pollyannaish. Yet, in the fullness of time, we sometimes see a winding path that led from that catastrophe to changes that transformed us. We have an accident, a loss, a diagnosis, and our only chance for sanity in the process is to expand our awareness to allow the difficulty, and to respond with awakened intelligence.

As Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Suffering is manure for the field of wisdom." And the field of wisdom is a far roomier place than the panicked confines of resistance to reality.

Human history is rife with examples of tragedies and difficulties that morph into openings, which would not have been possible without the preceding hardship. These often happen on a grand scale, giving birth to empathic understandings in human evolution. Much has been written and discussed about the ways the pandemic and climate chaos are forcing us to live more simply, make do with less, and co-operate with each other for resilience. People are also learning to be grateful for essentials, both in material needs and in matters of the heart.

This is not to say that all hardships have silver linings. Some things are damn hard and remain so. It is simply to note that some situations, which appear as errors in the cosmic order, can be akin to the irritant inside an oyster that makes a pearl. Fortunately, we can train our awareness to use whatever adversities we face, either collectively or personally, as manure in our own fields of wisdom. We might even choose to see all the so-called "errors," no matter how they work out, as just the way things roll.

The following poem, "This Error is the Sign of Love," by Lewis Hyde, was given to me in Dublin in the mid-1990s. I often hear its title in my mind's whispers.



This Error is the Sign of Love

by Lewis Hyde

This error is the sign of love,
the crack in the ice where the otters breathe,
the tear that saves a man from power,
the puff of smoke blown down the chimney one morning,
and the widower sighs and gives up his loneliness,
the lines transposed in the will so the widow must scatter
coins from the cliff instead of ashes and she marries
again, for love,
the speechlessness of lovers that forces them to leave it
alone while it sends up its first pale shoot like an onion
sprouting in the pantry,
this error is the sign of love.

The leak in the nest, the hole in the coffin,
the crack in the picture plate a young girl fills with her secret
life to survive the grade school,
the deaf twins who wander house to house, eating, 'til the
neighbors have become neighbors.
The teacher's failings in which the students ripen,
Luther's fit in the choir, Darwin's dyspepsia, boy children
stuttering in the gun shop,
boredom, shyness, bodily discomforts like long rows of
white stones at the edge of the highway,
blown head gaskets, darkened choir lofts, stolen kisses,
this error is the sign of love.

The nickel in the butter churn, the farthing in the cake,
the first reggae rhythms like seasonal cracks in a
government building,
the rain-damaged instrument that taught us the melodies
of black emotion and red and yellow emotion,
the bubble of erotic energy escaped from a marriage
and a week later the wife dreams of a tiger,
the bee that flies into the guitar and hangs transfixed in
the sound 'til all his wetness leaves him and he rides
that high wind to the Galapagos,
this error is the sign of love.

The fault in the sea floor where the fish linger and mate,
the birthmark that sets the girl apart and years later she
alone of the sisters finds her calling,
those few seconds Bréton fell asleep and dreamed of a
pit of sand with the water starting to flow,
the earth's wobbling axis uncoiling seasons – seed that
needs six months of drought, flowers shaped for the
tongues of moths, summertime and death's polarized
light caught beneath the surface of Florentine oils,
this error is the sign of love.

The beggar buried in the cathedral,
the wisdom-hole in the façade of the library,
the hailstorm in a South Dakota town that started the
Farmers' Cooperative in 1933,
the Sargasso Sea that gives false hope to sailors and they
sail on and find a new world,
the picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to the
invention of the lobster trap,
the one slack line in a poem where the listener relaxes and
suddenly the poem is in your heart like a fruit wasp in
an apple,
this error is the sign of love.

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