Problems and solutions

A smooth sea never made a skilled mariner. -- English proverb

I don't know about you, but my life is rarely problem-free.

I'm certain there are those people in this world that never have a bit of trouble. I don't know any of them.

There are three things I know about problems:

1. Everybody gets them.
2. You are up to the task of dealing with them, no matter what they are.
3. Although not every problem can be solved, each problem can be dealt with.

Life has a way of bringing troubles our way. Health troubles, family problems, money challenges, workplace issues -- all of them come into our lives, usually without even warning us they're coming.

What's a person to do?

If you're like most people, sometimes, it just seems that you need to sit down under a desk, grab your blue blankie, and suck on your thumb until the troubles go away. (Note to the reader: I don't have a blue blankie; I mostly crawl under desks to wire computers, and I gave up sucking my thumb when I started getting involved with photographic chemicals).

Again, if you're like most people, you find a way to deal with the challenges that come your way. You might confront them, or you may duck them, but you'll deal with them in one way or the other.

Here's why you are up to the task of dealing with -- and usually solving -- your problems:

Within your brain is a vast library of emotions, abilities, sensory impressions, and memories. Each time you go through a positive experience, you gain extra strength to aid you for the future. Each time you go through a negative experience, you are able to extract positive insights from the troubles you've seen. You then can use those positive insights to aid in finding solutions to future problems.

As examples of these two items, let me turn to a couple of personal experiences.
For the positive: when I lived in Japan, I was able to climb Mt. Fuji. There's an old Japanese adage that says, loosely translated, that if you don't climb Fuji when you have the chance, you're an idiot. If you climb it twice, you're a real idiot.

Well, I climbed it. I was mostly out of shape, afraid of heights (at the time) and no mountain climber -- but I got to the top. What's more, I got down again! Over the years, I have used that experience time and time again when times get tough -- I know since I didn't give up then, I don't have to give up now. It's usually a totally unrelated activity -- after all, how many volcanoes are you going to climb in your life -- but I still remember the wisdom I learned when I climbed Fuji-San: "If you keep putting one foot in front of the other, and don't give up, you'll eventually reach your goal."

To tell you the truth, I was mostly pressured into climbing the mountain -- and yet when I committed to it, I was able to stick with it -- albeit with a lot of encouragement from my friends on the trip.

Each of us has triumphs in our lives that we can draw upon. Even the emotionally downtrodden can seize upon early triumphs -- learning to walk, learning to ride a bike, learning to talk, finding your way to school, finding the right exit on the freeway while traveling in Boston -- and use those triumphs to build upon.

It really doesn't need to be related -- the important thing is that you had a challenge, you addressed that challenge, and you put it behind you, in a positive way.

There will be big problems in your life. Sickness of your loved ones and yourself may come; money may run short; careers may need to change. Even these big challenges can be addressed, if you remember the lessons you learned on smaller challenges. Even large demands may be addressed by smaller positive ammunition. The key is the same: find the positive, concentrate on the process of solving your problem, continue until the problem is addressed. It's like the shampoo bottle: "lather, rinse, repeat."

Just like I learned from Fuji: keep at it, one foot in front of the other, until you reach your goal.

Secondly, even negative experiences can serve as a positive influence. As the quote that start's this edition of Monday Motivation suggests, a calm sea does not make for a skilled mariner. People who never deal with challenges in their lives tend to be a bit more shallow -- just because they haven't had to learn to cope, change, and improve.

There's an old adage in military circles: a military that wins a war usually fights the same way the next time. A military that loses a war usually changes their tactics.
Troubles by themselves do not make for growth -- what makes for the growth is two things: analysis and introspection.

Analyzing a problem, and how you dealt with it, provides you a systematic idea of what went wrong, when it went wrong, and what the outcome was. Introspection is the distilling of that knowledge into wisdom.

Again, an example from my own life:

When I was 16 years old, like most new drivers, I thought I knew how to drive -- and drive well. I thought that up until the time when I actually had the driver's license examiner in the car with me -- and I was so nervous I clipped a parked car, and took a chunk out of its rear bumper.

It was only $20 worth of damage -- a speck, really -- and it couldn't go on my driving record, because I didn't have a driving record. Still, the trouble that caused, and the ensuing amusement from my friends -- none of whom had hit a parked car during their driving test -- forced me into introspection.

After I got my license the following week, I decided I would learn from my mistakes. I decided to pay particular attention to the driving world around me, to the extent that I started going over emergency evasive maneuvers, skid control, and proper following distance. I went over plans in my head to evade head-on collisions (so far, I've driven out of 16 potential head-ons). I became a much better driver, merely because I decided to build upon my initial downturn.

Sometimes, for example, we will have employment problems. Thinking about what we liked about our jobs, detested in our employment, how we were treated by our employers, and how we could have done better, can then help us in the future. We can become much better employees -- and employers -- because of how well we learned from our mistakes.

Here's what to do when you hit up against the really big problems:

Sometimes, life gives you challenges that seem too much to endure. When that happens, remember that other have faced up to similar challenges, and have pulled through it -- if they have faced it, you may face it too.

I read a news report today about a parrot that once was owned by Winston Churchill. The parrot is still alive -- and now over 100 years old -- and it still makes obscene remarks about Hitler and the Nazis, remarks it learned from Winston himself.

It's important to remember the parrot, because at the time Winston Churchill took over the Prime Minister's spot in Britain, it was pretty much assumed that
England would fall to the German war machine. The German advance had already overrun numerous countries, and it was assumed that England would be next.

Like some other countries did, England could have given in -- but instead, Churchill brought the best out of the British peoples -- and as a result, the Nazi invasion of England never came to pass.

Many people of his time said that Churchill didn’t have a prayer of success -- and yet he succeeded. Many naysayers suggested the country should just give in to the inevitable -- and yet the “inevitable” never came to pass.

With each big challenge that comes our way, we can make a decision -- whether to give up, or whether to start up. Giving up may be easier, but it will never be better.

The simple fact is that problems inevitably make us better, if we address them in the right way.

Storms will come, and storms will go -- the skilled mariner sails through the storms, because he or she has developed the skills to do so.

The fairweather sailor, meanwhile, soon is outclassed by the storm.

There’s an old story about a group of people who met together, and decided to switch problems with one another. After they had each heard about the other people’s troubles, each one decided to stick with the challenges they had.

It’s my hope that each of us will be able to deal with our own challenges, in the best, most positive, way.

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