

Flip Your Mindset

What stands in the way becomes the way.

Last year my grown son invited me to run an obstacle course race with him. Ten kilometres, twenty-five obstacles, designed to be hard. We signed up, paid the fee, and then went to work: an exercise plan aimed at the date, the right shoes and quick-dry clothing, travel and a place to stay, a look at the course map. Race morning we ate well, got up early, drove out with music on, collected our numbers, and lined up.

It was awful in all the expected ways. I failed the rope climb, which was disappointing. Failing an obstacle earns you a penalty loop, so we ran extra. We collected scrapes and bruises. At the end we jumped over fire, crossed the line, took the medal, and took the photographs. I have rarely felt better. I did something hard, I did it with my son, and we will both have it for the rest of our lives.

Now the same day, rearranged. You went to bed late watching television, with a beach day planned for tomorrow. You are woken suddenly, given two minutes, put on a bus in silence, driven into the desert, and dropped off with strangers who are told to start running. You have not exercised in years. There is no map and there are no signposts. You reach obstacles you have never seen and fail most of them, because nobody taught you the technique, and every failure costs you a penalty loop. Nobody says how long this lasts. Worst of all, nobody says why. Your lungs burn, your hands blister, you turn an ankle. Then it simply stops and you are driven home.

Ten kilometres. Twenty-five obstacles. Identical adversity, and if I interviewed you afterward you would be furious, certain you had been robbed, looking for someone to blame. Three things were different, and they are the whole course.

Adversity just is

- Life has a length, and nobody tells you which distance you drew. Life has obstacles, and they come in categories: physical, mental and emotional, financial, relational, societal.
- We have a very large vocabulary for this, which should tell you something. Misfortune, bad luck, trouble, difficulty, suffering, disaster, distress, hardship, tribulation, trauma, affliction, crisis, setback, pain, trial. Languages do not build fifteen words for a rare event.
- Pick your explanation. Physics offers entropy, the tendency of things to fall apart. Statistics offers noise, the randomness in any series of events. Murphy offers his laws: anything that can go wrong will, left alone things go from bad to worse, nature always sides with the hidden flaw, and if everything seems to be going well you have overlooked something.
- Every serious tradition, religious and philosophical alike, arrives at the same place: opposition is a feature of the arrangement rather than a defect in it.

So the useful question is not whether adversity will come. It is what separated those two mornings in the desert.

Key 1: prepare

- Everything I did for that race was preparation, and none of it was heroic. I read the obstacle list on the website. I registered before the deadline. I trained. I bought shoes with grip. I booked somewhere to stay, ate a real meal the night before, set an alarm, and put gas in the car.
- You will object that life is not a published course map. But it very nearly is. The obstacles have names, and you can read them: illness, injury, disability, death, divorce, family contention, betrayal, job loss, layoff, career setback, bankruptcy, lawsuit. In medicine we recognize patterns, the pneumonia in room five and the heart failure in room two. We know what you are. We just do not know your name yet.
- Written out by domain, the whole list fits on a postcard, which is either alarming or reassuring depending on your temperament. **Physical:** illness, injury, disability, decline, death. **Mental:** anxiety, depression, burnout, addiction, grief. **Financial:** job loss, debt, a large unexpected expense, a retirement shortfall. **Relational:** divorce, estrangement, loneliness, chronic conflict, losing someone. **Societal:** recession, disaster, upheaval, a lawsuit. Not one of these is exotic, and every one of them has literature, professionals, and people who have already been through it and will tell you about it.
- Run each through five questions and you have a plan rather than a worry. How likely is it? How severe would it be? What would prevent it? What would soften it? What would recovery actually take? Then the sixth question, which is the one that makes this survivable: where do I get the most benefit for the least effort?
- The first step of preparation is education. You need to know what a thing is, how it works, and what can go wrong. The phrase worth writing down: you may not be able to do everything you find out, but make sure you find out everything you can do. It would be a poor outcome to arrive at a real trial unprepared not for lack of ability but for lack of information.

- Watch for the "I didn't know" moments, and their close cousin, "nobody told me." Job loss with nothing saved. Retirement age with no nest egg. A natural disaster with no plan and the wrong insurance. A preventable disease. A marriage that quietly ran out of deposits. Ignorance is one excuse. "I knew, but not how" is a weaker one in the information age. "I knew, and I knew how, and I did not do it" is not an excuse at all.
- **Preparation happens in advance, which sounds obvious and is not.** Spring and summer are when you prepare for winter. It feels warm and there is no urgency, and the clock is running anyway. A farmer put it plainly: you have to get good at planting in the spring or good at begging in the fall.
- There are two kinds of pain available here. The pain of discipline, or the pain of regret. Regret is what being unprepared feels like afterward.

One more thing about that race worth saying. The medals are earned rather than handed out, and everyone there knows it, which is exactly why people pay for the privilege of a bad morning. Hold that thought, because it comes back at the end.

Key 2: expect

- I expected that race to be a hard morning, and it was, and that match is most of why it felt like triumph. Reverse it. Expect a walk in the park and get a marathon, and the identical morning becomes an injustice.
- Most of us carry a model of how life is supposed to go, and it is unusually specific. Loving parents and a happy childhood. The right college. Marrying well. Good health. Children who do well and go on to families of their own. A marriage that stays warm. A secure job. A portfolio that rises. Colleagues who treat you decently. Leaders who decide wisely. A civil society.
- Now the version many people actually get. A hard childhood, divorce in the house, loneliness in high school, an eating disorder. A path that did not go as planned. Work that is a dead end. No marriage, or a difficult one, or the loss of a child. Job loss and debt. An accident. Depression, anxiety, addiction. Losing your faith. Dementia. A nursing home at the end.
- Picture life as a day at the beach and live a Spartan race, and you have built a machine for producing disappointment, then blame, then the settled conviction that you have been cheated.
- Expect the obstacles and everything shifts. They are supposed to be here. They are how anyone learns anything.
- This is not pessimism, and the distinction matters. A pessimist expects the worst and stops. Expecting obstacles is closer to what any competent professional does: the pilot who runs the checklist is not gloomy about flying, and the surgeon who plans for the complication is not hoping for one.

Franklin

That which hurts, also instructs.

Marcus Aurelius

What stands in the way becomes the way.
Ryan Holiday built a book on that sentence:
when you have a goal, obstacles are teaching
you how to reach it. They carve the path.

Key 3: find meaning

- Here is the question that exposes the whole thing. Why would anyone pay to run an obstacle course? Because of what it is for. To prove I can do hard things. To become the kind of person who makes a plan and keeps it. To be reminded that hard things go better with people beside you. To build a memory with my son that neither of us loses.
- Now the man dropped in the desert. He was unprepared and he did not see it coming, and both of those hurt. But the thing that broke him was that nobody told him why. Not knowing why may be the hardest part of any adversity.
- Nietzsche: he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how. Viktor Frankl spent three years in the camps testing that sentence and concluded it was true, that the people who found a meaning in their suffering were the ones who endured it.
- The answers differ from person to person, and they usually share one feature: they point at something larger than yourself. Faith, principles, country, work, the people you love.
- Nobody can hand you your answer, which is inconvenient, because it means the work is yours. That work is a session of its own.

Where the rest of this goes

Those three keys are the whole course, and each one is a session of its own. The preparation session takes the four domains one at a time and gets specific: which numbers to measure, what to aim at, and where the effort actually pays.

The expectations session takes the second key apart, because the gap between what you expected and what arrived turns out to produce most of what we call suffering. And the last one is about the middle of an obstacle rather than the approach to it, which is where a single changed word does more work than it has any right to.

TRY THIS

- Name one obstacle you can already see coming, then name one thing you could do about it this month.
- Write down what you have quietly been expecting life to do for you.
- Take one current hardship and ask what it might be for.
- Choose the pain of discipline somewhere, deliberately, this week.
- Ask for the mountain rather than the easy road, and mean it.

Prepare for the obstacles, expect the obstacles, and find the meaning in them. Everything else in this course is those three things in more detail.

Resources

Questions worth answering on paper

- Which of these is most likely for me?
- How bad would it be if it came?
- What would prevent it, or soften it?
- What would recovery actually require?
- Where is the most benefit for the least effort?
- What did I expect that I never examined?

Referenced in this session

- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*. The source of the central idea.
- Benjamin Franklin, on what hurts also instructing.
- Friedrich Nietzsche, on a why and a how.
- Murphy's laws, in their fuller form.

Reading

- *The Obstacle Is the Way*, Ryan Holiday. The modern working-out of the Aurelius line.
- *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl. The book behind the third key.
- *Option B*, Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant. Resilience after loss, written from inside it.
- *Antifragile*, Nassim Taleb. On systems that get stronger under stress rather than merely surviving it.

Theme: adversity. From my course *Life's Obstacles*. The companion sessions are on preparation, expectations, and finding meaning.