

The Perfect Storm

When Life Hits all at Once

Wikipedia states that a perfect storm “refers to the simultaneous occurrence of weather events which, taken individually, would be far less powerful than the storm resulting of their chance combination. Such occurrences are rare by their very nature, so that even a slight change in any one event contributing to the perfect storm would lessen its overall impact.”

The phrase, “a perfect storm” has gained substantial popularity. Over time it has grown beyond the concept of a simple weather phenomenon and has come to mean any event where a combination of circumstances will aggravate a situation drastically beyond the individual elements or parts.

Life certainly has its perfect storms. They don’t blow into our lives all the time, but they do come. I’m not talking about the weather kind, but the emotional kind; the relational kind; the career kind; the financial kind; the medical kind, or the kind that hits just about everything all at once. Somewhere in the landscape of our lives things occur at given moments, in a given order, in a manner that devastates and destroys in ways that are confounding, frustrating and devastating. At one point or another we’ve all been leveled by these storms. We all have had our perfect storms.

There seems some sort of cruel injustice about it all; that we’re not only hit by various events, but the unique and untimely combination of these events elevates each individual event beyond what it would have been had it occurred alone. We understand that life can be tough and that life can be hard. I don’t think that we’re Pollyannaish about the realities of life and that it’s far from perfect. We hate the unfairness thing but we recognize that life can be utterly unfair. We know all of this. But sometimes the perfect storms make things hard in a manner that seems entirely unjust, completely insensitive, unnecessarily brutal and mindlessly destructive.

Not Seeing a Way Out

At times, the typical life circumstances and difficulties that we all endure can leave us wondering if life will ever be good again. The inferno of divorce, the panic of a job loss, the terrifying uncertainty of medical issues, the heartache of a wayward child, the emptiness of an unwanted death and so on. At these times, our pain in dealing with the stuff of life is complicated by an underlying fear that life will never quite recover or regain some sense of joy or meaning or purpose. We don’t see a way back out of this stuff, and we can’t visualize a way forward beyond it. We’re lost and hopeless at all once, leaving us wallowing in the quagmire of desperation. Life does this to us sometimes.

However, when those perfect storms hit they leave us with this terrifyingly convincing sense that life will not recover. We are hit with such force and our disorientation is so profound at these times that the future dissipates and is dispelled altogether. Such is the breadth and intensity of the pain and devastation that comes as a result of these perfect storms that hope is entirely obliterated and we face the immensity of our pain with the horrifying conviction of a life and a future entirely lost. Perfect storms are perfectly devastating.

A Perspective

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First, in the perfect storms that hit us our focus tends to be solely on the combined force of these events as they have come together. We forget that the events, when taken individually, are in reality far less powerful than the storm occurring as a result of their chance combination. In other words, we lose focus of the individual events and thereby grant these storms much more power than they possess in reality.

In the midst of the tumult, it is imperative to break down the events individually rather than focus on their combined force. What are the individual elements that make up the larger storm? What are the pieces and parts rather than the whole? While the perfect storm rages with a very real intensity around us, we can begin to take a bit of control and move toward some resolution by breaking the storm down into the parts that have made it up and progressively dealing those parts. As each part is diminished or resolved, the overall intensity of storm is likewise diminished. Once we effectively diminish or resolve one or more of these parts, the other individual parts that made up the storm become increasingly clear, manageable and likewise present as less intense.

Second, the intensity of the perfect storms in our lives leads us to believe that they are indeed unmanageable, or at least mostly so. There then sets in an unwarranted sense of hopelessness that this can't be beaten, or overcome, or solved. We assume a posture of defeated thinking that we can't even shave the thinnest edges off this thing much less do anything genuinely effective. Once this sense sets in, our ability to effectively manage our situation is severely undermined and we stand incapacitated when we don't need to be.

Third, we've all been hit by life circumstances before. Whatever we're facing today likely resembles something we've been through before. Instead of having been encouraged and energized by the fact that we've dealt with this stuff previously and therefore have some experience to handle it this time around; we wince at the thought of having to do it all over again. Is our past something to be dreaded or learned from? Is it a curse or a blessing, a resource or an irritation, a gift or something to be grieved? If we face our perfect storms with the understanding that we have some real resources to deal with those storms, they look quite different.

Finally, there's growth in everything if you seek it out. Our first course of action when these storms come along is to get out of them as fast as we possibly can. But in the midst of them there is opportunity to learn, to grow, to be expanded and to mature. The profound pain of these storms and their raging intensity typically makes the search for growth opportunities much less of a priority. However, there is in every storm, regardless of the size or ferocity, the opportunity to eventually exit the storm far better than you entered it. There is real and rich opportunity in every storm, perfect or otherwise.