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“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Tough times are times for personal growth. In all the seasons of our lives—but, particularly during tough times—it’s important to make the best of things. It’s important to see the difficult situations that come our way in life as opportunities for learning and personal growth.

In his popular book of the late seventies, *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck begins his book saying, *Life is difficult*. In the book, he talks about the human tendency to put off solving our problems, to avoid pain and struggle when—perhaps—pain and struggle are what we need to grow as a person or as a nation.

Life is difficult, it turns out, is akin to the first of the *four noble truths* which Buddha taught—that *life is suffering*. According to Buddhist teaching, *Life is suffering* because human nature is not perfect and neither is the world we live in.

Peck calls the awareness that *life is difficult* a great truth—indeed, one of the greatest truths. In a sense it’s a sort of wake up call, he says, because once we see this truth, we are able to transcend it. Once we truly grasp this truth and accept it—that *life is difficult*, full of daily challenges and tough decisions—it no longer matters because, by then, we’ve already moved on.

An opportunity for personal growth. For M. Scot Peck, the fact of *life being difficult* is an opportunity. It is an opportunity for personal growth. The problem, Peck adds, is that people don’t tend to see life this way—that life’s difficulties and problems are occasions for growth. Instead, they moan and complain about the enormity of their problems, their many burdens—all the while, as if life *should be* easy.

Perhaps, *The Road Less Traveled* is a book for the early part of the 21st century. In recent years, across our country, there has been a lot of national silliness disguised as anger. There’s a bevy of things, it seems, that people are angry about.

But if we take a deeper look, shouldn’t anger be about something deeper than more people—particularly the poor—having health care? Or, restoring a just tax system for the richest Americans? Or, a call for responsible regulation of Wall Street?

To be sure, we have serious problems in our nation that need resolution, most notably the economy. But isn’t it possible that even our economic woes offer us an opportunity to learn things about ourselves that can be helpful in the future?

The Road Less Traveled suggests that confronting and solving problems can be a painful process, a process which most of us tend to avoid or put off. And this very avoidance

results in still greater pain which ends up stifling our spiritual and mental growth.

Working our way through the growing pains. Always in life, in order to grow and evolve in ways that we need, we have to suffer our way through the necessary changes. Again, *life is difficult* and there is no pain-free way of getting to the other side of our problems.

Throughout our history, other nations have said about us that, comparatively, we haven't suffered much as a nation—that we've had it too good, that prosperity has come to us too easily.

With this in mind, is it possible that Peck is on to something here that, over time, would be good for America? Namely, that suffering through change and working our way through pain help us, along the way, become a more noble, responsible people?

Again, sometimes suffering and pain are the only way to get to the other side. As a nation, we are going through a period of uneasy growing pains. To begin with, every day, we're a more diverse people. That's simply our reality. We've always been a nation of immigrants. However, greater diversity always spells change.

The question for us is how are we going to embrace the change that is all about us? Do we see it as an enduring stumbling block to contentment and a sense of optimism about the future? Or do we view it as an opportunity to enlarge the circle of our lives and become bigger, more inclusive people along the way?