

A Rabbi and a Football Star: Hope and Commitment in the Face of Adversity

I was drawn to two articles in the October, 2007 issue of *Metrowest Magazine*, a publication distributed in the western suburbs of Boston. One focused on Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the bestselling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, the other on Doug Flutie, the 1984 winner of the prestigious Heisman Trophy as the best player in college football. Flutie won the award as a quarterback at Boston College and later played in the Canadian and National Football Leagues. He is currently a college football analyst on television.

Interestingly, Kushner served as a rabbi at a temple in Natick, Massachusetts, the same town from which Flutie hails. However, the major common thread in their lives is that both were confronted with painful situations related to their only sons. Many of my readers may be familiar with their stories, but others may not.

Aaron and Progeria

Kushner's bestselling book was published in 1981. He wrote it not only to honor the memory of his son, Aaron, who died at the age of 14 in 1977, but also to share his understanding of why a benevolent God would allow good people to experience intense anguish and pain. Kushner eloquently describes that authoring the book reflects his struggle "as someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world. . . to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God's ways."

Kushner notes that when Aaron was three years old, their daughter Ariel was born. He and his wife, Suzette, had been concerned about Aaron's development since he stopped gaining weight when he was eight months old; his hair began to fall out after he reached his first birthday. On the day of Ariel's birth, the Kushners were devastated to receive a diagnosis of Aaron's condition from his pediatrician. They were told that Aaron had progeria (rapid aging) and that he "would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was a child, and would die in his early teens."

In the *Metrowest Magazine* article written by Sandra Balzer Tobin, Kushner observes, "As Aaron grew older he became aware that there was no more hope and that he would not survive. When he realized he was going to die, he became anxious about dying young without having left any type of legacy. So I promised him I would tell his story." Tobin notes, "The

book posits that all tragedy is not God's will and even God cannot solve all suffering. It encourages readers to learn from their losses and turn them into something good."

Since the publication of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Kushner has written nine more books. His latest, *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, uses the life of Moses to advance the message that we must persevere when confronted with adversity. Kushner says, "This book helps us to learn from the life of Moses how to fail without feeling like a failure. Although events conspired against him, Moses never loses faith or focus on what he wants to do. I wrote this book to warn people that you are going to be looking back at the age of 80 and wondering what you did with your life."

Doug Jr. and Autism

Doug Flutie and his wife Laurie have known each other since they were students at Natick High School. They have a 19-year-old daughter, Alexa, who is in college and a 15-year-old son, Doug Jr., who suffers from a severe form of autism. He is unable to speak or manage basic bodily needs. In the interview in *Metrowest Magazine* written by Sandra A. Miller, Flutie states, "Before Dougie was diagnosed, he developed very typically. He talked in full sentences and could carry on a conversation with anybody. He shot baskets and played football. Then we noticed a regression and by the time he was three he had completely lost his social skills, his eye contact, and his ability to speak."

Miller writes, "An autism diagnosis can devastate families, but Laurie says she and Doug didn't stay in the 'why us?' place for very long. 'That doesn't do you any good,' she insists. 'So we kicked ourselves and said what are we going to do here? Doug's attitude helped a lot. That's the way he is on the football field. He takes a challenge and says, 'I'm not giving in. We're going to win this one.'"

Miller continues, "But autism is not a simple one to win. In fact, it's arguably easier to hurl a Hail Mary pass 48 yards into the end zone for one of the most talked about plays in college football history, than to overcome the disability for which there is no known cause or cure. If the Fluties were going to win this one, they had to redefine winning. In the past nine years, that's what they've done. In 1998 Doug received a \$25,000 signing bonus from the Buffalo Bills and wanted to do something meaningful with the money. The Fluties decided to give half to quarterback Jim Kelly's foundation, Hunter's Hope, named for his son who suffered from

Krabbe disease, a severe neurological disorder. With the other half, the Fluties started their own foundation in Dougie's name. 'We originally thought it would be a small foundation, generalized in the New England area,' Laurie says. 'But then it just blossomed. Doug had a very good season with the Bills and the foundation grew with his career. Now it's grown well beyond our expectations.'"

The article ended with another statement by Laurie. "I don't claim to be an expert on autism, but I've learned a lot through the Foundation and by talking to other families. Doug and I want people to know that we're going through it, too, and if we can help in any way, that's what we want to do."

Purpose Defined, Lessons Learned

It should come as no surprise to those who have read a number of my other articles or the book I co-authored with my colleague, Dr. Sam Goldstein, *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, why the lives, words, and actions of Kushner and Doug and Laurie Flutie were especially meaningful to me. Obviously, their grace, dignity, compassion, and purpose in the face of adversity would be of interest to anyone. However, as I read what they said and did, I continually reflected upon those factors associated with "stress hardiness" and resilience.

As I have written in previous works, Dr. Suzanne Kobasa found that those individuals who deal more effectively with stress and adversity possess a "stress hardy personality." Kobasa identifies three major characteristics of this personality. I prefer to use the word *mindset* in place of *personality* to reflect my belief that we are all capable of becoming more stress hardy; *mindsets* are typically seen as open to modification while the word *personality* is associated with an entity that is fixed and more resistant to change. I think all of us can apply to our lives the lessons learned from Kushner and the Fluties.

The three features of stress hardiness described by Kobasa are subsumed under the categories of commitment, challenge, and personal control. Kobasa describes *commitment* as being involved with, rather than alienated from, the many aspects of life. When commitment is present, we possess a sense of purpose that tells us why we are doing what we are doing. We are guided by a vision that provides passion and meaning to our lives. This meaning or commitment

is not confined to a single area but is manifest in our personal relationships, in our work, in our charitable activities, in causes we adopt, and in our religious practices.

Rather than dwell on the question of “why me?” Kushner and the Fluties turned their personal anguish into a commitment to strengthen the lives of others. In addition to his writings, which have been of comfort to many, Kushner and his wife, Suzette, helped to form the Progeria Research Foundation. As noted earlier, Doug and Laurie Flutie launched a foundation in their son’s name to help other families who have children who are autistic.

The second component of a stress hardy mindset is *challenge*. Not surprisingly, stress hardy people are those who perceive difficult situations as challenges from which to learn rather than as situations causing despair and helplessness. Anyone who has read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* can attest to Kushner’s struggle to understand the death of his son in light of his view of God as benevolent. Rather than resignation, he challenged himself to make sense of conflicting feelings and thoughts, especially as a clergyman. As quoted earlier, Laurie Flutie used the word *challenge* in describing her husband’s approach to their son’s autism.

The third feature of stress hardiness is *personal control*, a theme in which I have become increasingly interested. Kobasa found that people are less stressed when they devote their time and energy to managing those situations over which they have some control or influence. Neither the Kushners nor the Fluties had any control over the emergence of the illnesses faced by their sons. What they did have control over were their attitudes and actions when confronted with these illnesses. As I have noted in many of my workshops, it is to be expected that parents confronted with serious illness in their child would initially ask “why my child?” or “why my family?” However, to continue to pose that question contributes to ongoing sadness and defeatism and paralyzes us from taking more constructive action that would add meaning to our lives and the lives of our children. To change a negative mindset is not easy, but to maintain such a mindset eventually saps our energy and robs us of the opportunity to experience future happiness and purpose.

In the early 1980s when I first read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* I was moved and comforted by the conclusions Kushner draws at the end of the book. I think they represent a powerful, transforming lesson for all of us.

He writes, “Is there an answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people? That depends on what we mean by ‘answer.’ If we mean ‘is there an explanation which will make sense of it all?’—why is there cancer in the world? Why did my father get cancer? Why did the plane crash? Why did my child die?—then there is probably no satisfying answer. We can offer learned explanations, but in the end, when we have covered all the squares on the game board and are feeling very proud of our cleverness, the pain and the anguish and the sense of unfairness will still be there.

“But the word ‘answer’ can mean ‘response’ as well as ‘explanation,’ and in that sense there may well be a satisfying answer to the tragedies in our lives. . . . In the final analysis, the question of why bad things happen to good people translates itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it has happened.”

Kushner next poses some thought-provoking questions. “Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease, crime, earthquake, and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?”

He ends with a poignant remembrance of Aaron, a remembrance that holds significance for us all as we confront life’s adversities.

“I think of Aaron and all that his life taught me, and I realize how much I have lost and how much I have gained. Yesterday seems less painful, and I am not afraid of tomorrow.”