

Exercises in Futility

Charlie Brackett

Perhaps each of us at one time or another has felt that no matter how hard we tried, there was little or no good result. All we could do seemed as nothing but an exercise in futility. It has a terrible ring to it, doesn't it? Futility. Futile. All effort is without good results, useless. There is no value whatsoever. How negative! Can there be any positives hidden somewhere in the despair of futility?

It is easy to be positive when making progress, when achievement is characteristic of the progress. It is easy to be bright and cheerful when you are on top of things, when it seems that everything you touch is successful. Most of us know the feeling. *Everything's roses* as they say. Futility, however, carries with it the opposite of achievement and progress.

Perhaps the greatest test of a truly positive mind comes when all is futility. At each turn there seems to be no way through, no beneficial goal, no measurable progress that can be objectively weighed with a good, rewarding feeling. The apostle Paul knew that moment. *"We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..."* (2 Corinthians 4:8, 9) A truly positive mind can somehow see the bright side. Paul's did. An old story has a farmer in a barn wading around in waist high horse manure. As he shovels the material outside he can be overheard saying, "There must be a pony in here somewhere!"

So, what of exercises where all is futile? Is there any value?

I believe the answer to be *yes*. Though, I must admit my belief is hard to affirm when in the midst of my own futile circumstances. Still, I believe the answer is *yes* on at least two counts.

First, such situations build character. An exercise in futility is, after all, an exercise, and there is positive value in exercise. Each of our abilities finds opportunity to be stretched, expanded and honed to a finer degree of strength and skill; there is an opportunity to increase our level of patience and endurance. Our capacity for viewing life with hope and positive expectation is challenged. We are reminded of our own inadequacies and how much we depend upon others, especially upon God. And, we gain new levels of appreciation for the good things, the things which for the moment seem gone forever: *"...we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus Christ, the Son of God,..."* (Hebrews 4:14) Because of Him we can *"...come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy in the time of need."* (vs. 16)

Most of us will continue the struggle as long as we have hope; hope for some rewarding conclusion which promises to be worth the struggle. But what fool would persist when he realizes that *all* effort really is futile? Probably few. Suppose, however, the cause is noble. For example, a soldier takes his solitary stand for freedom against hundreds. Would anyone argue that such a stand is not futile? Certainly not, if measured in terms of personal attainment in this life. But most of us would immediately argue the nobility of the cause and recognize that there can be value in futile situations apart from any personal gain through character building.

Noble causes have a way of affecting more than the individual. They touch those of other times and places. The cause of freedom has spanned centuries. Somehow by the efforts of freedom fighters willing to sacrifice in futile situations, freedom has managed to survive and be savored by millions down through history. How miserable your existence and mine if it were not for those who faced futility, believed their efforts would be futile, yet stood courageously nonetheless. Those who enjoy freedom today are indebted to every generation which preceded them, especially to the cadre of those who, undaunted by futility, stood relentlessly to the bitter end.

The cause of *truth* is even more noble than the cause of freedom, and many there have been who persisted in futility, standing for truth. Why is truth more noble than man's freedom from man? Truth is eternal. Truth may not be held in esteem by man, but he can never change it, never take it away. Truth continues to be whether in freedom or bondage, whether believed or ridiculed, whether practiced or ignored. Freedom is conditional; truth *is*.

Who among us is courageous enough to stand for the cause of truth, even though the circumstances be futile? Christ did. And so did the apostles. Will you? Will I? May the God of Heaven help each of us face this life's obstacles with positive resolve and help us always stand for truth. Jesus said, *"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* (John 8:32)