

# If You're Going Through Hell: Some Thoughts

By hell, I mean neither a trivial bad-hair day nor that bleak circle of hell reserved to the clinically depressed, a condition treated these days with medication and counseling. No—by hell I intend that protracted war in which you are a lone soldier and the forces arrayed against you are as dark and insidious as Mordor's Orcs.

This is the hell where you wake beset by your demons as soon as you open your eyes, fiends aroused by self-doubts, physical diseases, the betrayals and lies of others, your own forfeiture of personal honor, the guilt you carry like a cancer. This is the hell where your hours are ordeals to be endured, where you take punch after punch against the ropes. Unlike King Midas, all that you touch in this hell turns to lead. Here twilight offers no beauty, no laughter, no comfort other than the knowledge that sleep may soon be yours, releasing you for a few hours from your interior Alcatraz.

Sometimes circumstances or the words and actions of others build those prison walls. You are preparing supper for your husband and children when the oncologist's office calls and changes your life forever. You wake to the sound of knocking and find two grim policemen at the front door, telling you about an accident and asking whether the girl they name, the girl you have raised and loved for seventeen years, is your daughter. You realize one day—the enlightenment comes as swiftly and vividly as nirvana to a bodhisattva—that someone you love no longer loves you. You give your life to a dream, achieve it, and then watch it stripped from you by the jealous and the greedy.

Sometimes we build our own fences, brick walls, and guard towers. Rarely in these instances do we intend to fashion a prison. No—we begin with innocent thoughts and pure intentions. We get a credit card, then another and another,

and one day find ourselves wearing the shackles of ruinous debt. We fall in love, but realize too late it's the wrong time and with the wrong person. We feel immune to temptation and are stunned when we find ourselves companions with iniquity.

Occasionally, others intensify our torments, tightening the rack on which we lie stretched, applying the lash, heaping coals on the fire consuming us. A few months after my wife died, leaving me to raise our youngest son, age nine, alone, a woman who was a stranger to me recommended a camp that offered grief counseling to children, an option I never thought to consider for my son. "It's popular and effective," she said, then added, as an afterthought: "I personally consider it a form of child abuse when parents don't send their children to that camp."

Thanks, lady.

We fight our demons with a variety of weapons. Some of us go into therapy, seeking answers from experts familiar with the vicissitudes of the human heart. Some of us seek forgetfulness in alcohol or drugs. Some blame other people or outside circumstances for their problems: the easy-credit gang tempted them, their parents raised them wrong, they are the victims of race, or class, or gender.

And then there are the ones who stand on their feet, confront the dark shadows of their hell, and refuse to be beaten.

These are the ones who can say, "I was wrong." They can say, "I'm sorry." They try to make amends for the pain they have caused. They turn their backs to their critics, labeling such assaults, as the writer James Jones once did, as "small-arms fire." They may waken daily to a leaden world, but they still say "Cowboy up, baby" as they step into their terrible, horrible, no-good day. They stand tall before the daily firing squad and have the guts to own their failures and add responsibility to all their other burdens.

Churchill nailed it: *"If you're going through hell, keep going."*

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