



# Royal Bank Letter

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## *The Uses of Adversity*

*When does bad news become good news in our personal affairs? When it inspires us to correct the faults that may have caused it. Whether trouble beats us, or we beat it, is the central test any of us face. The challenges of adversity are also educational. They teach us what really matters in life...*

"Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward." Needless to say, that reference to "man" in the King James version of the Book of Job encompasses women as well. It may be safely assumed that no person of either sex has ever lived entirely free of suffering and tribulation. Nor has there ever been a period in human history that did not have its full share of turmoil, ruin, and misery.

A million pages of chronicles, a million metres of documentary film, are there to tell us that human life is punctuated by adversity. Strange, then, that the surges of trouble that are so certain to occur catch so many of us off guard.

Like powerful storms, reversals of fortune create the most havoc when men and women have failed to prepare for them. Yet, faced with the probability of developments that could adversely affect our fortunes, many of us act as if the wind will never blow hard again, so that we can get by living in a tent.

For instance, the most basic common sense tells us that we could always suffer accidents or that our health could fail; therefore we should not act in ways that invite or aggravate ailments. And unless we are among a very lucky few, we could all face financial reversals. We know full well that, when times are good, we should build up assets against the possibility of their turning bad.

Given that such difficulties are liable to arise at any time, it is amazing how few of us have taken the fundamental precautions to cushion their impact. But then, considering human nature, perhaps it is not so amazing after all. Our basic instincts lead us to believe that serious trouble can never come to us — and to try to dodge it when, inevitably, it does.

This attitude seems to be especially pervasive in modern western societies. Whole generations have grown up with a vague notion that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, it might just be possible to stay out of harm's way. The notion is not without its own supporting evidence. Nowadays, thanks to medical science, a person's good health may be maintained pretty well indefinitely; and up until recently, steady economic growth presented those in the social mainstream with a reasonable prospect of lifelong financial security.

The economic events of the past few years may have had a sobering effect on mass expectations, but not on the mass media. Though filled with stories of other people's woes, tragedy and strife, the media nevertheless continue to convey the impression that human beings actually can live a virtually trouble-free life.

In advertising on television and in glossy magazines, we rarely see anyone who is not basking in such bliss that his or her biggest problem is something like having bad breath or dandruff. Between commercials, televised situation comedies take us into a realm in which happiness is depicted as a standard state of human affairs, with only enough inconsequential difficulties to make life interesting.

The fictional denizens of TV Land are nearly always well-fixed financially, have rewarding jobs, exude good health, are physically attractive, and fall easily into loving relationships. Their conflicts seldom amount to much more than a source of benign fun.

The underlying message is that, if you are not happy, healthy, and relatively prosperous yourself, your life is not measuring up to the norms of the society around you. In a recent article in *Esquire* magazine, Tad Friend wrote that TV viewers expect sitcoms to show them

their place in the world. In their intimate familiarity with the characters in the shows, viewers regard them as friends who are very much like themselves.

The danger is that people may be subliminally persuaded that sitcoms really do illustrate a feasible way of life, and that an aberration of fate has deprived them of the continual contentment that is everybody's birthright. They feel cheated to the extent that their experience does not coincide with the fantasies on the screen.

While there can be no denying that there *is* plenty of happiness among actual human beings, it is anything but constant or universal. The misapprehension that contentment is a standard condition may explain why young people who have been raised watching television seem to be particularly susceptible to deep depressions

when they encounter set-backs which earlier generations more or less took in stride.

In the great world outside of the TV set, the climate is treacherously changeable. Real people get swept up in general social, political, and economic

disruptions; their personal relationships turn hostile and bitter; they are felled by illness and robbed by bereavement; they lose money and jobs.

Since such vicissitudes cannot be avoided or denied, the only choice they offer is to let them beat us down or to stand up to them. And, just as we should prepare to stand up to them physically and financially, we should brace ourselves psychologically.

"No life is so hard that you can't make it easier by the way you take it," the American novelist Ellen Glasgow wrote. A prerequisite to learning how to take it philosophically is to avoid the "why me?" syndrome, the feeling that you have been singled out for a special dose of misery. Everybody, as they say, has problems, and many of those are likely to make yours look insignificant by comparison. Remember the folk tale about the man who was in despair because he had no shoes — until he met a man who had no feet.

We can never develop a sense of proportion about our own circumstances if we persist in measuring them against mythical standards of contentment set by others — television producers or whoever. Many people are unhappy mainly because they conclude from surface impressions that others are better-off than they are. A look into the secret hearts of those they envy might make them feel quite differently. "There are no greater wretches in the world than many of those whom people in general take to be happy," Seneca observed.

"If we were all to bring our misfortunes into a

common store, so that each person should receive an equal share in the distribution, the majority would be glad to take up their own and depart," Socrates is quoted as saying. That is what is called putting things in perspective, which is essential to making the best of a bad situation. Perspective provides us with the strongest of all defences against the destructive forces of self-pity: the ability to laugh at our woes, because we do not take them too seriously. "A good jest in time of misfortune," said the American lecturer Henry Ware, "is food and drink."

As a general rule, people are inclined to view negative facts through the distorted prism of pessimism. The brighter side ought to be given its due. "When any calamity has been suffered the first thing to remember is, how much has been escaped," Samuel Johnson wrote. Among what has survived, you might find, are things like personal integrity and the love of our peers — in short, the things that really matter in life.

The least we can salvage from the bad spells we go through are some cautionary object lessons. "Though all afflictions are evils in themselves, yet they are good for us, because they discover our disease and tend to our cure," the great 17th century preacher and one-time Archbishop of Canterbury, John Tillotson, wrote.

A contrary turn of events should be an automatic signal for a searching assessment of our personal responsibility for it, so that we can get to work on rectifying the faults and attitudes that may have contributed to it. If we do not want to repeat our mistakes, we should not lightly excuse ourselves as the hapless victims of misfortune. "Lots of folks confuse bad management with destiny," the American humorist Kin Hubbard observed.

We can, of course, be subject to adversity that is not of our own making: bad things do happen to good people. In fact, much unnecessary grief may flow from individuals blaming themselves when something happens which is beyond their control. It is not unusual, for instance, for parents to feel unnecessarily responsible for their children's failures, or for survivors to feel guilty about the deaths of family members. On balance, however, it is far more usual for people to blame problems on others than to blame themselves.

In dinner conversation, all the ills of the world may be ascribed to politicians or something suitably amorphous like "the system" or "the establishment." When things go wrong, it is natural to look around for scapegoats. Cursing these convenient creatures may bring some fleeting psychological relief, but it serves no lasting purpose. The fact is that you are in trouble no matter what the cause.

*The best defence  
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The energy spent in blaming others would be better used in trying to dig oneself out of one's own predicaments. To blame the system or any other external force for your troubles is the next thing to denying responsibility for your own lot in life. If you really believe that the powers-that-be are intrinsically blind or hostile to your interests, it logically follows that it is futile to do anything about your own case because they will only crush you again at the first opportunity. This is a political manifestation of the fatalism which led the ancient Greeks to conclude that it was pointless to struggle against the gods.

Fatalism goes with bitterness, a condition which distinguishes chronic losers. Losers always say that they have rotten luck, or that they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. The theory that one's fate is beyond one's control provides good excuses for inaction and indolence. Since trouble has a way of regenerating itself, the chief effect of a fatalistic attitude is to open the door to more trouble. Often the surest way to make a bad situation worse is to do nothing when trouble occurs.

True, most religions urge acceptance of the divine will, but that is different from the blind superstition which precludes examining one's fate or striving to change it. When, in the Book of Job, the upright rich man of that name suffers terrible losses and ills, he does

*Learning to accept adversity literally as a necessary evil*

not immediately conclude that he is the helpless pawn of unseen forces. Instead, Job searches for faults within himself that might have brought on his afflictions, and debates his case with his associates.

Though at times he comes close

to losing his faith, he adopts an even-handed attitude towards adversity. How, he asks in effect, can man be so arrogant as to receive good at the hand of God, and not also receive evil? If the Lord can give, the Lord can take away.

The perception that the burdens of human existence are imposed to test one's faith lends true believers the spiritual strength to endure pain and hardship. It is only when people see their trials as meaningless and gratuitous that they become seemingly impossible to bear.

Some theologians believe that adversity is essential to the functioning of the universe — literally a necessary evil. Without a certain tension between the good and the bad, the whole divine scheme of things would fly apart.

The 17th century English philosopher and bishop, Richard Cumberland, proposed a theory of universal benevolence which incorporates an admixture of evil. "I do not wish to expose my ideas to ingenious ridicule by

maintaining that everything that happens to every man is for the best; but I will contend, that he who makes the best of it, fulfils the part of a wise and good man," he wrote.

Certainly adversity seems necessary to the growth of humility, which is the starting point in the search for spiritual fulfilment. Men and women everywhere who devote their lives to worship frequently live in conditions of extreme physical privation and discomfort. Devout lay persons, too, will go on fasts to acknowledge that they "have it too good" materially for their own good spiritually.

*The noblest acts of mankind have come from stern social trials*

Most of us, however, feel no need to seek out adversity; we are grimly confident that it will come to us without invitation. But when it does come, we might ask ourselves why those monks and nuns and pilgrims deliberately cultivate hardship. The reason is simple: It is that living with adversity makes people into better human beings.

"Let me embrace thee, sour adversity, /For wise men say it is the wisest course," William Shakespeare's King Henry VI says in his hour of desperation. And indeed, great thinkers over the ages have taught that men and women must be exposed to tribulation to bring out their finest qualities. An ancient Chinese proverb put the proposition memorably: "The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor men without trials."

The reverse, of course, is also true: as the grinding process brings out flaws in a stone that cause it to shatter, so adversity brings out flaws in character that are usually the result of past indulgences. Some people do let their problems beat them; in extreme cases, they let their problems beat them to death.

Their suicide may be quick, or dragged out over a long agonizing period. In the latter case, self-destruction often flows from self-pity. People who feel sorry for themselves are prone to pursue habits which temporarily blot out reality, but in the end undermine their physical and mental health.

It must be said, though, that the human response to adversity is more likely to be marked by courage than by cowardice. The noblest acts of mankind have arisen from severe social trials such as disasters and wars. Neighbours never treat one another with more consideration than when they face hardship together. In times of crisis, ordinary individuals often surprise themselves by proving braver and more resilient than they thought possible. It is out of adversity that heroes are made.

If the human spirit is at its best when it has to rise to a difficult occasion, the reverse is also true: people show



their worst side when there is nothing to stand in the way of indulging their desires. "Prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue," as Francis Bacon wrote.

The gossip columns of today support the point. We read of the famous actress on her fourth or fifth empty marriage, the rock star addicted to cocaine, the playboy embroiled in a sex scandal. At the same time, adversity reveals some of the most admirable figures in our society: the handicapped person who has scaled every obstacle to accomplish marvellous deeds, the impoverished mother who deprives herself so that her children may have an education, the athlete who triumphs in spite of a terrible injury.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote of "the uses of adversity," a phrase which may seem self-contradictory on first reading. What utility can there be in conditions which entail loss and pain? But when you think of it, adversity is not only useful, it is essential to all progress. From the seven

*Not keeping out  
of the rough, but  
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once we are in*

wonders of the ancient world to the latest breakthroughs in the science of healing, no great work in any field was ever accomplished without frustration and toil.

Adverse circumstances provide the resistance necessary to generate creative tension. When everything is going smoothly, there is little incentive to improve conditions, or to right wrongs. Thus adversity provides an impetus to the thrust towards a more just, equitable, and well-governed society. In this respect, societies react like individuals — those that experience too little resistance to their aims are prone to a complacent attitude that masks weaknesses, and promotes arrogance and vanity.

Adversity is what keeps us from "going soft," whether in societies or as individuals. When muscles are not exercised, they become slack and weak. All the exercises that keep people physically fit entail striving against some form of resistance. By toughening our bodily fibres, we gain the strength and stamina we need to resist physical ills when they strike.

As fitness trainers like to put it, "no pain, no gain" — we all need challenges to push us towards our best performance. Competitive sports add an extra element by pitting players against human adversaries. Here we have not only a test of physical strength, but of strength of character. "Love your opponent," an American football coach told his players. "He's the guy who makes you as good as you can be."

Sports show up the *need* for adversity. In many cases, the person who plays a game "just for fun" is someone who feels a lack of challenge in his or her everyday life. These people make up for the shortfall by adopting pastimes which test them both physically and psychologically. The rules of sports deliberately add difficulty to tasks which might otherwise be too easy. Sports teach us lessons in living. For instance, as John H. Moore wrote about his favourite game, "The real test in golf as in life is not in keeping out of the rough, but in getting out after we are in."

In the working world, the rough patches in peoples' economic fortunes can galvanize their abilities. While good times tend to lull the mind, bad times will boost it to full capacity. Adverse developments serve as a spur to enterprise and creativity, eliciting talents people might never have known they had in them. The annals of business success are full of stories about people who were fired from jobs and went on to make a fortune elsewhere. What seemed at the time to be the worst break they ever had, turned out to be the best break over the long term.

By successfully handling adversity, a person is likely to be better equipped to handle prosperity when things turn up again. If you can fight off despair when everything looks dark, you can resist the temptation to slacken off or indulge in excesses when everything looks bright. An experience of life's ups and downs helps to develop a constructive sense of one's strengths and weaknesses. "He who has not known ill fortune, never knew himself, or his own virtue," as the Scottish poet David Mallet declared.

If tribulation brings a better sense of who you are, it also shows you who your real friends are. Adversity has a beneficial purgative effect on the inessential things of life, including the inessential relationships we develop when all is going well. Insincere "love" relationships are unlikely to pass the acid test of suffering. When two people really love each other, their suffering is shared.

"To love all mankind, a cheerful state of being is required; but to see into mankind, into life, and still more into ourselves, suffering is a requisite," wrote the German humorist-philosopher Jean Paul Richter. A man or woman who has failed and recovered, who has persevered through successive hardship and ills, is in an excellent position to understand the feelings of others in this hard and sometimes terrible world.

Adversity helps to develop a view of life characterized by empathy and charity. The cultivation of humane and sensitive persons willing to act with love and compassion towards their fellow creatures is undoubtedly the greatest of all the uses of adversity.

