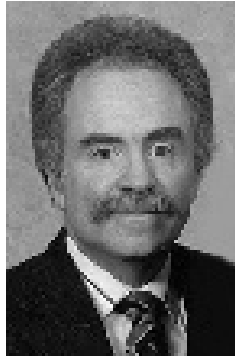


Hearing God in a Time of Crisis

by M. Blaine Smith, D.Min.

James Michener was an astoundingly creative and productive author. The historical novels he wrote required intensive research and the most acute understanding of cultural nuances. The production of one such tome would be an outstanding accomplishment for any writer. During his lifetime Michener authored *forty-three* of them, completing one a year for several decades, researching one while writing another. He continued to write until he was 92. He also moved numerous times, residing as often as possible in the region of the world he was researching for another major work.



M. Blaine Smith

Two stunning factors in Michener's transformation into one of the great writers of all time offer encouragement to each of us in realizing our own potential. One is that he didn't begin writing novels until he was 40. His example brings to mind that some of us are simply late bloomers by nature, and that there can be vital benefits to being so. We shouldn't lose heart if we have a major dream that hasn't yet been realized even though we're well into our adult years. We each operate on different clocks, and God has radically different timetables in unfolding his plan for each of us.

Equally interesting is that Michener's decision to become a writer emerged from a severe personal crisis—a near-death experience, in fact. Michener had dreamed of becoming a novelist for years, but had dragged his feet—not fully confident of his potential nor wanting to take the risks involved. Then a plane he was on crashed, after making three attempts to land on the South Pacific Island of New Caledonia. Michener, a military correspondent with the navy at the time, went immediately to his quarters, sat down and wrote, "I'm going to live the rest of my life as if I were a great man. ...I'm going to concentrate my life on the biggest ideals and ideas I can handle." He began work the next day on *South Pacific*.

Michener's experience, which he termed a "theophany," reminds us that God may use a crisis—even a severe one—to help us better understand his purpose for us and changes in direction he wants us to take. The point is especially redemptive to consider at this time, when our nation is reeling with grief over the events of September 11, and many of us continue in disillusionment and shock.

I'm not suggesting that God *caused* the tragedies of that day in order to bring us certain benefits or to teach us certain lessons. None of us has the slightest idea what was in his mind in these events, and we are on horribly inappropriate ground to speculate. It is highly appropriate, though, to ask how God may want us to grow personally through these calamities. It's not only permissible to ask the question, but critical, if we're to fully realize our potential for Christ. Stewardship of our life requires it.

Compelling Examples in History

We find endless examples in history of notable individuals who had a defining moment in the midst of a major crisis. There is Victor Frankl, who in the excruciating circumstances of a Nazi concentration camp, concluded that while his torturers could control many aspects of his life, they absolutely, positively could not control how he felt or thought about his experience. His insight led to an important new movement in psychology, logotherapy, and inspired his book *Search for Meaning*, which has influenced millions.

Also inspiring is the experience of Maria Montessori. After graduating from medical school in 1896 and becoming Italy's first female physician, she was denied the privilege of practicing medicine in that country due to her gender. Instead, she was assigned the demeaning role of caring for "idiot" children. Montessori decided she could *educate* these supposed incorrigibles, and within months had them reading and writing at normal levels. The experience defined her life calling and transformed her into an educational prophet who radically influenced the thinking of twentieth century teachers.

Pioneer aviator Amelia Earhart had a near-death experience at age 5, which also changed her forever. She raced a sled down a snowy slope, defying custom and lying flat on it like a boy. At the bottom of the hill she encountered a horse and buggy straight across her path. With no time to stop or maneuver the sled around it, she skillfully glided it underneath the carriage—an impossible feat had she been sitting up, as was “proper” for a girl. In her autobiography, she reflected that the experience transformed her life and gave her the courage to take major risks.

A more recent example is John Walsh, who while grieving his son’s apparent kidnapping and murder, conceived *America’s Most Wanted*—a TV program he continues to host, which has aided the apprehension of hundreds of elusive criminals.

Of course, there is also the example that many of us as believers find most inspiring of all—that of Saul of Tarsus, who went through a radical shift in his thinking about Jesus Christ and his life mission after he was blinded by God on Damascus Road.¹

How Crises Arouse Visionary Insight

There are at least six ways a crisis can open us to understanding our life’s purpose and mission more fully.

1. Crises activate our right-brain thinking.

One important reason a crisis may foster critical insight into our life’s direction is that it frees us from our bondage to the left-brain thinking that normally dominates our outlook. Left-brain activity is essential for most of the routines and functions of daily life. But far-reaching visionary inspirations always evolve from our brain’s right hemisphere. Since our left- and right-brain functions are exclusive to an important extent, the Eureka-I’ve-found-it insights rarely emerge when we’re preoccupied with routine responsibilities.

This is why those pace-setting epiphanies about our life’s mission usually occur when we’re on vacation, on retreat, in the shower or doing something mindless and relaxing. These are activities that free our right brain to function more fully and creatively. A crisis, ironically, may bring the same benefit, for it forces a break with our normal routine and compels us to set left-brain activities aside. Human potential writer Gene N. Landrum goes as far as to call crisis “the mother of creativity.”²

This isn’t to say that we should *seek* a crisis or that we have to have one to precipitate a life-changing vision for our future. There are much more pleasant ways to encourage such inspirations, to say the least; a vacation at the beach or a personal retreat in the mountains may accomplish the purpose just as effectively. But, it is simply to say that the crises we

inevitably experience can be the setting for breakthrough epiphanies about our life as well. This is true, in part, because of how God has fashioned our intellect and creative process.

2. Crises knock out the props that keep us too grounded in our present security and unwilling to risk.

Realizing our potential, and finding God’s best for our life in any area, always requires steps that, from our human standpoint, seem like risks. The willingness to risk, and to risk big, is absolutely essential if we’re to experience life as God intends it and open ourselves fully to his provision.

This openness to risk is often strong when we’re young and imagine that we have an endless future to redeem any mistakes. As we grow older, we typically grow too risk-averse. We may still long for greater adventure, a stronger sense of mission and work that more clearly taps our potential. Yet, we’ve hit a stride in life that’s comfortable, and we fear risking what we’ve gained for the sake of an uncertain future.

Sometimes a crisis knocks out a prop directly that is standing in the way of God’s best for us. A woman wants to go into business for herself and has the talent to do so, but sticks with a job that has her working far beneath her potential. Then the company she works for goes bankrupt. Now, unemployed, she realizes she has much less to lose by starting her own venture and takes the plunge.

In other cases a crisis knocks out a prop indirectly and symbolically. In the days following September 11, as the networks aired the unthinkable footage of the Twin Towers collapsing repeatedly in an almost endless video loop, who among us didn’t reflect often on how the possessions in which we personally take security are temporary and can vanish in a second? That insight in itself is redemptive, and can free us to risk losing what we have for the sake of God’s greater purpose for our life. In that spirit we may be able to recognize more clearly a new direction he wants us to take.

3. Crises deepen our appreciation for the gift of life itself, and strengthen our sense of urgency to seize the opportunities we have.

In the same way, a crisis reminds us that life itself is an unspeakable gift of God; the opportunities we have are not endless, and choices do not present themselves forever. We’re awe-struck that God has given us the privilege of life, and more determined now to make something of it. It was this realization, springing from his close brush with death in the plane crash, which convinced Michener to begin writing, a decision that changed the course of his life—and literary history—forever.

4. *Crises draw us closer to God and open us more genuinely to his direction.*

The greatest potential benefit of a crisis, far and away, is that it can strengthen our relationship with Christ. We're driven in our brokenness to seek his comfort, and in our helplessness to seek his help and direction.

Of course, a crisis may do just the opposite: it may ignite our anger at God for tearing from our life something we treasured. This reaction is normal and human, and can be a necessary part of the grieving process through which we recover and heal. When David and a team of helpers were returning the ark to Israel from Philistine, God slew two of David's assistants who touched the ark inappropriately. David's immediate response was anger at God and fear (1 Chron. 13:9-11).

Yet, in time the experience humbled David and deepened his relationship with God. That outcome is the ideal for each of us—and the sooner we can reach that point the better. In many cases a crisis thrusts us there immediately. This clearly has been the case for many of us who have been stunned by the tragedies of September 11. We've felt compelled to pray for those who are suffering and to seek God's encouragement for ourselves. And we've recognized more fully than ever how desperately we need God's help in a life that now seems far less stable than we imagined.

It's in this state of mind and heart that God is best able to *communicate* with us, and in which important insight into our life's direction is most likely to come.

5. *Crises stimulate our desire to help others, and help us better recognize how our life can benefit others.*

The events of September 11 demonstrated the worst possible side of human nature. Yet, they quickly brought out the very best in people as well, as millions throughout the world were deeply moved to look for some way to extend their help.

Whether or not we are able to assist with this or any crisis directly, the fact that it arouses our desire to help is itself a positive factor. We can be startled to discover just how deeply we're capable of caring for others and hurting over their misfortune, and how greatly we yearn to do something significant to make a difference. Even a crisis that slams us and disables us personally can bolster our compassion for others, for it deepens our empathy for those who are suffering the same hardship.

It's at this point when our compassion is ignited that we're most inclined to ask the right questions about our life's purpose and mission. We're also best positioned to understand the answers God may give us, and to recognize steps of faith he wants us to take.

6. *Crises help us appreciate the resilience God has put within us, and strengthen our courage to take challenging steps essential to realizing our potential.*

One reason we hesitate to take vital steps of faith is that we fear failure too greatly. We imagine we won't be able to handle an experience of loss that might occur, and will never recover.

Yet, in fact, God has made us each far more resilient than we normally realize. A crisis can bring us face to face with this extraordinary fact of human nature. We discover that we are capable of picking up the pieces of our life and moving on. Over time we find that God works many miracles, healing our devastation and bringing fresh life out of the ashes. This discovery can revolutionize the way we think about risk, and enable us to entertain possibilities for our life we would never have considered.

Greg Lukens, a friend of mine who was blinded at 13 in a tragic dirt bike accident, expressed it to me this way: "I stared adversity in the face, and asked what would be the worst that could happen if I lived a normal life. I realized I might trip over a rock from time to time, or fall in an occasional ditch, but that would be it. I decided I could handle these setbacks and wouldn't let the threat of them hold me back from living fully." He went on to live a highly active life and to found a major audio supply company, which he continues to manage. He has kept his life moving at full throttle toward dreams that are important to him, in spite of what most would term a serious handicap.

Greg's secret is a profound recognition of his own resilience—one that goes much deeper than most of us experience. Here lies an important secret for each of us in unlocking our own potential. The appreciation of our resilience that grows out of a personal crisis can make an enormous difference, in finding the courage to take risks and in our ability to think big about our future.

Looking Forward

It seems almost trivial to say that the events of September 11, 2001 will change our lives forever. Since early on that day news commentators, political and religious leaders, and friends with whom we've spoken have reminded us of this fact continuously. None of us disputes their assessment. The question of *how* these calamities will change us is the critical one.

Our immediate need is to look as carefully as we can at how we can assist with emergencies around us and extend our help to those with urgent needs.

Our longer-term need is to come to grips with our own life's direction from this point forward. God will call some of us to make important changes in light of these events and others to stay the course. Nothing will benefit us more in weighing the options than to

devote some generous time to prayer and quiet reflection about our future. It helps greatly to realize that we're in a better position at a time such as this to understand Christ's leading than we normally are. We should listen carefully to the stirrings of heart we experience at this time, for in them we may be hearing the whispers of God.

Notes and book recommendation

¹ For further elaboration on how crises affected most of the historical figures mentioned here, see Gene N. Landrum, *The Eight Keys to Greatness: How To Unlock Your Hidden Potential* (New York: Pometheus Books, 1999).

² Op. Cit. p. 227. I highly recommend Landrum's book; although not written from an explicitly Christian perspective, and unfortunately poorly edited, it has some excellent discussion of right- vs. left-brain thinking, as well as of how crises can foster creative and visionary insight.

Editors Note: *The preceding article is excerpted from a longer article by the same title available in its entirety on the Nehemiah Ministries website: www.nehemiahministries.com.*

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