

## Embracing Contingency

We can only be grateful for the powerful technology we have. Yet because the United States has more of it than any other country, we who have access to it are challenged to restrain our tendency to use it. But it will always be difficult to use wisely as long as the world is as bad as we fear. If only we could depend on something more than the power of our thinking and the tools we possess to stand between us and disaster.

We are outside the garden now; we have eaten of the tree, and there is no going back. We know too much to return to its innocence and safety. The world is scary, accidental, and random, but the more we attempt to control the chaos, the more we fear what remains outside our control. Unfortunately, at one level the world of Genesis beyond chapter 3 confirms our fears. Outside the garden, the human race faces a world of violence and pain; the soil is hard, the thorns are sharp, and from the moment Cain killed Abel, because Abel received a blessing that Cain did not, jealousy and envy have marked nearly every human story. Sarah envies Hagar, Jacob envies Esau, Laban envies Jacob, and Rachel envies Leah—over and over creating trouble, violence, and injustice.



The last third of Genesis is occupied by one final story, that of Joseph, whose envious older brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. After selling Joseph, they assume they have solved their problem, but their view that having Joseph around was bad and selling him as a slave to Egypt was good created the problem of their father's grief, which was exceedingly bad. Though all his sons and daughters came to comfort him, "he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.' So his father wept for him" (Gen. 37:35). Jacob's sadness was slowly taking the life from him.

In the midst of unanticipated outcomes, failed attempts to make things better by our weak understanding of good and bad, and the ongoing presence of sickness and sadness—no matter what we do—we realize that despite our best efforts we truly do not know how it is going to be. It is hard to admit, but we are actors in a play who know only a small piece of the script, and we long for a director who knows what is next. As C. S. Lewis writes:

*We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who are the minor characters. The Author knows. . . . That it has a meaning we may be sure, but we cannot see it. When it is over, we may be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. The playing it well is what matters infinitely.<sup>1</sup>*

And "playing it well" we would gladly do, if only we knew we were a part of a story where contingent events do not bother the director, uncertainty and unpredictability do not disturb the plot, and surprise is even embraced as essential to the story.

## He Works for Our Good

After the garden, one might suppose God would leave us to our own devices; after all, if this is what humanity wanted, we got precisely what we reached for. But God does not stop caring, as the stories of the imperfect people of Genesis show over and over. And the book of Genesis does not end with Joseph's slavery or a father's grief.

***God remains an active agent in the world and is able to incorporate even the things we assume bad into a greater plan.***

The brothers have come to Egypt, where Joseph has risen to second in power under Pharaoh. And the father, reunited with his son, has died in peace. Now those who sold him into slavery stand before their powerful brother, afraid of the "bad" he will do in revenge for what they did to him. But Joseph has a different worldview. He believes that the universe is not random. He sees that personal knowledge of good and bad is not as reliable as we think. And he knows that the play has a director who is not disturbed by contingency, is completely in control of the script, and even absorbs and makes use of the mistakes of the actors. As the book of Genesis closes, Joseph's words to his brothers give us good news for an anxious age: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me [plotted against me], but God intended it for good [tob] to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid" (Gen. 50:19–21).

That God remains an active agent in the world and is able to incorporate even the things we assume bad into a greater plan that can be good has the possibility to drastically change the way we pursue health and face sickness. Every time our health is in danger or we become ill, naturally and appropriately we will pursue the good of keeping or regaining our health. But are there times and places when other goods are possible? The idea that God is good, that God seeks communion with us, and that God has power and intention to work out good no matter the bad leaves us open to a much wider range of hopes and expectations than the singular one of health at all costs and with any technique.

But our ability to cultivate this sense of contingency and contemplate this vision of reality is constantly challenged by the prevailing worldview. We are trained in another way of seeing—that nothing of weakness, dependence, difficulty, pain, or suffering can ever have any meaning.

The world is an unpredictable place, and we can flourish only if we can depend on someone stronger and wiser than ourselves to make it safe.

### Notes:

C. S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 105–6.

*This article is adapted from Pursuing Health in an Anxious Age by Bob Cutillo, MD.*

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