

## **Chapter 10**

### **Reframing Adverse Events**

I'd slept in. I woke up as usual around 6am and was contemplating my day as I lay in bed. I'd been unemployed for just over 6 months and didn't have any job prospects. It seemed that I lacked the qualifications for most of the jobs that seemed interesting to me. I was considering going back to school to get a masters of public health (MPH), since applying for jobs and not getting interviews wasn't working for me. I didn't want to go back to school. Yes, it seemed like the next best step and appeared to be a sure way to open up the career I was looking for, but I really didn't want to go back to school. I'd just finished my Ph.D. two years ago and I wanted to work.

I lay there contemplating the deadline for applying to school and how I needed to contact three people to ask for references. Filling out an application for school just wasn't enough to motivate me to get out of bed. I fell back to sleep and was surprised when I didn't wake up until 10am. “Wow! That is really late for me.” I thought.

I got up and took the dog out for a walk. As we were walking back towards the house I noticed my car door was ajar. “That's interesting, I didn't shut my door.” I'd gotten back late last night after dropping my daughter off at her father's house and must not have shut it tightly. As I reached the car I noticed the glove compartment was open and then I noticed other stuff strewn about the car. Someone had gone into my car and searched through it.

“Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house not a creature was stirring not even a mouse.” Meanwhile outside somebody was ransacking my car on Christmas Eve.

At first I thought nothing was taken. They left about five dollars in

change, although they had clearly gone through the change holder. They even left a dollar bill that was in the same area. Two pairs of pruning shears, a down sleeping bag, 50 CD's in a carrying case and everything else was left untouched. Maybe they were just looking for the car keys? or drugs? Later I realized that they had taken about 10 or 15 dollars in singles I had stashed in a holder by my steering wheel. I had just put the money there the day before when I was out shopping with my daughter. The single dollar bills were taking up too much room in my wallet.

I called the police and made a report. The officer made a remark about the holidays being a high crime time. She recommended I keep my car locked.

I was somewhat numb. I think my emotional state was more related to the fact that I was all alone, unemployed, without good prospects and trying to figure out how to take care of my self on this day that I had wide open. I'd been robbed before and then I was left with a sense of violation and vulnerability. This time it felt different. Sometimes it takes awhile for the emotions to settle in so I gave myself time. I went for a longer walk with my dog at a local regional park, Helen Putnam Park.

My mind began rolling the event over. The first question was, "Why me?" The second question was, "Why anybody?" It certainly seems sad that someone would.....

Now what exactly were they doing. Were they violating me? Were they being mean and thoughtless? Were they trying to hurt me? Did they feel entitled to take what I owned and they wanted? Did they need money?

I could feel a number of old scripts trying to run through my brain.

There was a tendency to judge them. *That was wrong of them.* There was also a tendency for me to feel like a victim. *Poor me, I didn't do anything to deserve this.* I also occurred to me that perhaps I was in the wrong. *I didn't lock my car.* Here was an opportunity to judge me. *It was really all my fault.* I also experienced fear. *What if they come back?*

None of these thoughts brought me peace. When I judge others and feel like a victim I get angry at them and/or sad at my sorry state. When I judge myself I feel shame at my behavior and either feel angry that I'm not better or sad that I'm so hopeless. If I feel I've done something wrong it is easy to experience fear that I am attracting this evil into my life.

I thought, "I don't want to feel like a victim. I don't want to be a victim." I considered the possibility of reframing the incident. How about: This person didn't steal my money, I gave it to them. That actually felt better. Wow! That felt really good. Then, I considered telling my friends the story and got a pang of shame. Something about rewriting the situation to just make me feel better felt like lying or being in denial. Other people might think I am distorting reality.

I contemplated this. Was it okay to change the way I perceive a situation in order to feel better about it? I wasn't sure if this was healthy behavior, but I did know I did it all the time. When I lost my job I chose to believe that there was nothing I could do about it at the time and that it was for the best. Now six months later I am still choosing to believe that the adversity that surrounds my continued unemployment will ultimately stimulate useful growth or place me in a position to benefit the most people.

Given the subjective nature of reality, it would seem that interpreting a situation in such a manner as to bring me peace would not necessarily

be unhealthy. In fact, from the Buddhist perspective it would be a greater distortion for me to believe that I didn't create that illegal entry and robbery last night. The Buddhist beliefs of karma suggest that my past actions create the reality and situations I find myself in today. I don't hold firm beliefs about cause and effect, but do like to take advantage of all situations and use them to fulfill my goals of personal peace and community service.

I may not have consciously decided to leave my car unlocked and some cash next to the steering wheel so that someone in need might get it, but now that it has happened I am considering restocking the money in case my friend comes back tonight looking for more. However, I am also considering locking my car so they don't return and take the items they left the first time. In any case, reframing the situation as an act of giving to a needy person brings me peace.

This type of giving reminds me of the food and toy collections that are prevalent this time of year. I always wonder who gets the food and toys. Are people given things they don't want and can't use? My daughter likes stuffed animals and not dolls. I imagine someone donating a beautiful doll and it ending up in the hands of someone that doesn't like dolls. Or maybe the person allergic to wheat ends up with the box of crackers. For these reasons I am hesitant to donate. I want to be more in control of what I give and who gets it. One thing for sure about my donation last night is that the person was able to pick out what they needed from amongst all my stuff. I am happy they got to pick what they wanted. I just wish I would have been given the opportunity to choose what I was getting rid of. I wish them peace and prosperity in the new year.