

## THE POWER OF PERCEPTION

Week #1 of a 3-Week Series, "From Impediment to Empowerment"

July 19, 2023

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I'm so happy to be here tonight! So happy to get to work with Cerise (Patron, the evening's soloist). In case you don't know, I adore this girl! And, to me, she'll always be a girl, because I met her when she was 21 years old ... so she'll always be 21 as far as I'm concerned. And I am that same age as I was then also, right? So we love that!

"I Go to the Rock" (referencing the solo that Cerise sang before the message). We're going to talk tonight about ... it's going to take me a little while to get back to that song. But I don't want you to forget the lyrics to that song. "*The rock of my foundation.*" We're going to do a little groundwork before we get back there, but we will get back there. Even if I don't specifically remember to say it, we will get back there.

Many years ago, I was introduced to this little book called *The Obstacle Is the Way: the Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumphs*, written by Ryan Holiday. It's a great book for using whatever might be happening in our lives that has caused us to feel like it's a bump in the road. Anybody here tonight ever experienced a bump in the road? I'm being Richard Maraj right now; he loves to ask questions and have you raise your hand! [Congregation laughs] So I've got to do that a little bit, right?

We've all had bumps! Some of us are probably having a bump right now. I'm going to actually invite you in a little bit to think about what that might be and apply what we're going to talk about in this book to that bump.

But I want to start by reading; it's story time. It's evening; it's story time. No milk and cookies, but a little bit of a story. I want to read just a little bit -- maybe a little bit longer than you think I should read -- but this is so juicy, I want to share this with you. This is the preface for the book.

The book is based on Marcus Aurelius. Anybody know who that is? "Oh, yeah!" Sue knows! That's good! Well, you'll find out as I read this. So here's a piece -- not the whole thing, but a part -- of the preface.

*"In the year 170" ...*

Okay ..

*"In the year 170, at night in his tent on the front lines of the War in Germania, Marcus Aurelius -- the emperor of the Roman Empire -- sat down to write. Or perhaps it was before dawn at the palace in Rome. Or maybe he stole a few seconds to himself during the games, ignoring the carnage on the floor of the Coliseum below. The exact location is not important. What matters is that this man, known today as the last of the five good emperors, sat down to write ... not to audience or for publication, but to himself. For himself. And what he wrote is undoubtedly one of history's most effective formulas for overcoming every negative situation we might encounter in life: a formula for thriving, not just in spite of what happens, but because of it."*

Take a breath on that one. Thriving not just in spite of what happens, but because of what happens.

*"At that moment, he wrote only a paragraph. Only a little of it was original. Almost every thought could, in some form or another, be found in the writings of his mentors and idols. But in a scant 85 words, Marcus Aurelius so clearly defined and articulated a timeless idea that he eclipses the great names of those who came before him. Here's what he wrote:*

*'Our actions may be impeded, but there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions. Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting.'*

*And then he concluded with the powerful words destined for maxim.*

*'The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.'*"

What stands in the way becomes the way. During our three weeks here -- I'm so excited to be here three weeks in a row! You just have no idea how excited I am about that! During the three weeks, we're going to explore how to turn an impediment into a chance for greater empowerment.

How to turn an obstacle into an opportunity to grow bigger in God. To turn a misfortune into good. Hmmm. No, let's not say good; let's say great fortune. To turn a complication into an evolution of our consciousness.

So I want to offer you this. I mentioned it already, but now here comes the offer. I want you, if you've got a blip in the road in your life right now -- and maybe it's a little, tiny pebble that's a blip, or maybe it's a big blip. It's a relationship blip; it's a health blip; it's a job/financial blip. Whatever it might be ... If you have something going on in your life right now that is looking like an obstacle to your happiness; an impediment to your joy; a challenge ... I want you to bring it. Bring it right here. Bring it! Because I want our next three weeks to be an experiment: an experiment on living what Marcus Aurelius suggested in 170 ... a couple of years ago. [Congregation laughs] What he suggested. A way he suggests that we could live.

And I want to just add a little piece that you'll hear more about tonight and in the future: that this dovetails perfectly with some new science-based work that I'm involved in right now about our brain's chemistry, and why we think why we do and how we can change that. This is exactly in line with it, and I love when things line up.

So are you up for that challenge? To bring your challenge? Bring your big problem? [Congregant: "Yes!"] Yes? Good! Three of you; I love it! [Congregation laughs] That's all I need!

So according to Ryan Holiday, the author of this book, to move from impediment to empowerment takes a discipline in three steps.

Step one is to begin to look at the specific problem, and how we look at that problem -- or what our perception of that problem is. That's number one.

Number two is to move energy and creativity by actively engaging in something to turn that impediment into an opportunity.

The third one -- and I'm going to read this one straight from the book, because it's a bit of a mouthful and I don't want to mess it up -- includes *"the cultivation and maintenance of an inner will that gives us the strength and fortitude to handle whatever life gives us."* And then I'm adding: To know -- the will and strength and fortitude to know -- that life does not happen TO us; it happens FOR us.

Those are the three disciplines. We're going to take one each week. So they could be boiled down to say:

The first one is about **PERCEPTION**.

The second one is about **ACTION**.

And the third one is about **WILL**.

Tonight we're going to talk about perception.

So this thing in front of you ... Not me, but the problem that you have. [Congregation laughs] The problem that you have; the issue; this challenge; this impediment; this obstacle that is messing with your joy and with your happiness. That right now you're probably thinking -- and perhaps saying to anyone who will listen -- that it's the reason that you're not a happy camper. It's the reason that you kind of snapped the other day at your spouse or your partner or your employee or your dog or whoever. This thing in front of you is the reason that life is not good for you right now.

But what if you looked at that differently? What if you perceived it as something that actually isn't so bad? That, in fact, isn't bad at all?!?

Take a breath. I'm going to invite you to do that a number of times tonight. Because I might be challenging you. And, of course, that's my job: to challenge you; to push you a little bit. I probably have said this before here, but I love it. I love this statement about what a minister's job really is. A minister's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. [Congregation laughs] That took a moment to settle in there, didn't it? Yeah; it did! Yeah! So that's my job tonight is to afflict you if you're a little too comfortable. [Laughs]

So I'm going to start with a story. A Zen story about looking at something that looks so bad, but maybe it's not so bad. So there was this king of a kingdom. And he was feeling like his people had grown sort of soft and entitled. And he was dissatisfied with this, and he wanted to do something about it. He wanted to offer them an opportunity to grow; stretch; maybe get out of their complacency. So this is what he came up with.

He decided to have his soldiers in the middle of the night place a very, very, very heavy and a very, very large boulder right at the entrance -- or exit, whichever way you were going -- of the city. On the path. And you couldn't pass; you couldn't get around this boulder. You couldn't either enter or exit the city with this boulder. And he waited. He hid himself over in the trees and waited to see what would happen.

So people came by, and he said, *"Okay, maybe this group, this person, this group of people are going to work together to figure out a plan to move this boulder."* No; they didn't. They just turned around and came back where they came from.

Then he thought, *"Okay; here comes another group! Maybe they're going to stick with it until the boulder is moved."* No; they didn't do that, either. They just turned around and came back where they came from.

With growing disappointment, the king watched subject after subject after subject come to this impediment and turn away. Some of them half-heartedly tried, but not really giving it a real try. Some of them outwardly complaining and griping about the king. *"How dare he let this boulder sit here and impede our way! How dare he! How can he treat us this way? How horribly oppressed and mistreated we are!"*

Finally, one day this lone little peasant ... It was clear he was a peasant from the way he was dressed. He wanted to get into the city. And he sees this boulder. And he tried everything he could do to move it. He pushed it with his hands. He backed up against it and pushed it with his back. He tried to lift it. There's no way that he could physically move that boulder. But then he got an idea, and he went scurrying off into the forest and he came back with a big, big branch that he had fashioned into a lever. And he put the lever under that boulder and hoisted it up. And it rolled away!

Guess what he discovered underneath that boulder? There was a bag -- a little bag -- under the boulder. And he opened the bag. And in it were enough coins to feed him, clothe him and house him for the rest

of his life! And a note from the king that said, *"The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget: within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve your condition."*

Whenever we face a challenge in our life -- no matter what it looks like -- what seems to matter most is not what matters most. So what seems to matter most is the problem, right? What seems to matter most is this obstacle in front of me -- this boulder in front of me! That's what matters most. No! It's not the obstacles that matters most! It is our perception of the obstacle that matters most. And that perception of the obstacle makes all the difference in the world.

Ryan Holiday, the author of the book, writes this:

*"Seen properly ..."*

Key words right there!

*"Seen properly, everything that happens -- be it an economic crash or a personal tragedy -- is a chance to move forward. Even if it is on a bearing that we did not anticipate."*

Even if it's on a bearing that we did not anticipate! But "seen properly" is really the key phrase there, isn't it? "Seen properly." How are we perceiving this obstacle; this challenge; this problem?

Holiday wrote something that really jumped out to me in this section of the book. He said that just because your mind tells you it's awful or it's an obstruction to your good, or otherwise negative, doesn't mean you have to agree with it! Just because your mind tells you something is terrible and awful, you don't have to accept that as true. We tend to, right? We tend to automatically say, *"Well, this is just terrible! Throw up my hands!"*

But we don't have to believe that! We -- you and I -- get to decide. We can tell ourselves something different about it. That's the power of perception. We get to choose how we look at anything -- anything! -- that comes into our lives.

The fact is: We can't change the obstacle. We can't change it. But we can perceive it differently.

And I love "The Serenity Prayer." Many of you, I'm sure, know "The Serenity Prayer," right?

*"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference."*

I happen to like a little slightly tweaked version of that. I always love little edited versions of things. I often edit them myself! I did not write this editing, but I love this. Listen to this:

*"God grant me the serenity to accept the person that I cannot change,  
The courage to change the person that I can,  
And the wisdom to know that that person is me."*

[Laughs] Right? That person is me. I can change my perception of anything.

So, no; we can't change the obstacle itself. That part of the equation is set. But we can change the way we perceive it.

And as Robert Frost said in his great poem: *"I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."* Perceiving a challenge differently is the road less traveled ... definitely the road less traveled by us, by humanity. We've spent our whole lives ... Humanity has spent most of its entire existence complaining about things that we didn't like. That's definitely the road most traveled. But we can take the road less traveled and make all the difference in the world.

I wouldn't be able to give a talk without at least quoting one time Ernest Holmes, the founder of Religious Science, which is a sister to Unity and is the spiritual lineage I grew up in. And so I have to quote Ernest Holmes from the book called *The Science of Mind*. And this is what he said:

*"If we believe in suffering, we shall suffer. Life responds to us in the way we approach it. We should choose that which we wish to embody, and by constant attention to it, take on all its characteristics. Let us choose to be identified with power, with love and beauty, with peace and with happiness. Let us identify ourselves with abundance and success."*

So you might go, *"I like that quote! That's a good quote! Ernest Holmes was a smart guy; I love that quote! And I love this idea, Michele, about having a different perspective, a different perception of the problem. But you don't know my problem."* [Congregation laughs]

[Laughs] I'm not going to ask for a raise of hands, but I'm just going to ask you to think: Did that go through your mind? *"Yeah, that's all well and good, but not for this thing that I'm facing right now. No; no; no! This is a big, bad thing. Not my issue."*

And I will lovingly say to you, *"Yes, your issue applies, as well."* Every issue in life can be looked at through a different lens and become the way of growth; the way of expansion; the way of deeper clarity; the way of greater happiness.

So I want to give you a couple of example of that. One of them comes out of this book. And it's about an actor you may have heard of; he's a little bit popular. His name is George Clooney. Anybody? [Congregation laughs] Anybody not heard of George Clooney? Okay; you all have seen *ER* and a million movies that George has been in.

So here's the deal. I did not know this until I read this story in the book. So here is George's story. When he started wanting to be an actor and going out and applying for parts -- trying out for parts -- he got rejected over and over and over and over again at his auditions. And he got despondent about it and he blamed the producers; he blamed the scripts. He blamed!

And I'm not saying we blame ... but, come on! We can all blame all sorts of circumstances and conditions for our unhappiness, and for our not getting what we want.

So he blamed; he blamed; he blamed. and after doing that unsuccessfully for quite some time, he started thinking about it. And he started thinking maybe he had a different job. Maybe his job wasn't to go in and get that part. And as he deepened into the thinking, he turned to a new part of his brain that could be a little more curious than just being the victim. He started thinking, *"You know, I bet these producers have just as hard a time as I do. As I'm trying to get a part, they have just as hard a time trying to find the right person. That's got to be hard for them!"*

So he started thinking about that. And he started thinking, *"You know, maybe ... Maybe I need to show them that I am, in fact, the right person for the role. Not that I can act -- because I can act! And I know that. But that I am, in fact, the right person for the role. I should make their lives easier. That's going to be my job from now on: To go into an audition and make their lives easier by showing to them that I am the right guy. I can bring it to this role! I can do what they want! I can be who they need."*

And that turned everything around! If he had continued in his career to just blame and go on auditions and not have this different perception, there would be no heartthrob for so many women to pine over. [Congregation laughs] And men! To pine over, right? He wouldn't be around for us to pine over him with longing, right? [Laughs]

The obstacle. The obstacle made a difference. The obstacle became his way.

I want to give you a second story. This one is more personal. It's actually about my husband, Lonny: greatest man on the planet! Although I know there are many, many great men sitting in this room, he truly was a great, great man.

He was a graphic designer; he went to Ohio State. Top of his class. Graduated in design. In Ohio, worked for a really high-level advertising agency. He decided he didn't like the cold of Ohio anymore and wanted to move to Arizona. He knew Tucson; he didn't know Phoenix. He knew Tucson, so he went to Tucson.

And he had this beautiful portfolio, because he'd done all this great work for this company that he worked for. So he had this beautiful portfolio and he's going to all these advertising agencies. This is in the '70s -- mid '70s -- when he moved to Phoenix. And he said, *"Hi; I'm a graphic designer and here is this work. And ta-dah! And I'd love to work for your company."* And this is what I heard: *"Man, you do great work! But we don't need a graphic designer; we need an account rep."*

He's like, *"Okay."* So off he went to another one; and then to another one; and then to another one. And he kept hearing the same thing: *"Great work! You do great work; we don't need a designer. We need an account rep."*

So he exhausted all of the agencies in Tucson, and I'm glad of that, because that caused him to move to Phoenix so many years later he and I could meet! He started going to advertising agencies here, and he's hearing the same thing. So being a sharp cookie -- it took him a little while -- but being a sharp cookie, he said, *"Let me just change my strategy. If these people need an account rep, I can do that!"* And so the next interview he went into he said, *"Hi; my name is Lonnie Whittington. I'm an account rep."*

*"Oh, my gosh! We need you! We need you!"*

So he went to work as an account rep. And he brought in so many accounts that he had to start working on their projects, because they didn't have enough graphic designers to do the work! And he soon got out of being an account rep, which he didn't really like, and was able to do his graphic design work ... which he did happily, joyously and beautifully for over 40 years.

The obstacle is the way.

One more story -- very personal -- that I didn't plan to share, but it's here; it's up for me. Probably because I'm sitting here looking at Jeanie sitting right there in the front row. And she's in a class with me, and I shared it with my class last night.

We were talking about this very idea of the things that look bad actually have gifts and opportunities in them. Every single thing has a gift and opportunity in them. And we were sharing some things that have happened in our lives that were difficult. And yet, what's the gift?

And I said, *"Ladies"* -- there were eight of us. I said, *"I would not be sitting in this room with you guys in this beautiful circle of women digging deep into beautiful teachings and having experiences together that are amazing ... I would not be here doing this if my precious husband were still alive. I would not be doing this."*

Now, am I happy that he's not here anymore? No! Do I still have grief about that? Yes; I do. And we can't change the obstacles. It was his soul's time to go, so he left five years ago. He left this planet five years ago. What am I going to do with that? Am I going to have it ruin my life? Or am I going to turn his leaving into something powerful and positive for me and, hopefully, for others. And that's what I've done!

And sitting there last night, I said those words last night: *"I would not be here if Lonnie were still here."* Whew. That's a big obstacle and a big, beautiful blessing that I have in my life to live the life that I'm living now.

So, we can't change a lot of what's in front of us. We can't change the situation. But we can change our perception of it, which is our thoughts about it; our judgements; our emotions; our creativity; our attitude; our desires; our actions ... which we'll get to next week. Our curiosity. We can change all of that. This is our playing field. This is the field that we can play on. Everything is fair game.

We can't change the circumstances. No; we can't.

There's another thing we can't change, but this is the good news. And this goes back to the song that Cerise opened us up with. The other thing that we can't change -- and thank goodness we can't change it! -- is that there is an infinite power of God's good standing at the ready to be expressed through our lives. That never changes! That's a spiritual truth that never changes!

And in that divine Intelligence that is God -- which is way vaster; way bigger; more expansive than I or you could ever, ever get to -- this obstacle, this thing that's in front of you that you identified earlier, is exactly what is needed for the next phase of your evolution. For the evolution of your soul. For the growth of your consciousness. That is a pretty cool pay-off, if you will, for the challenges that we face.

So how do we shift? As we bring our time to a close here, how do we shift to a place to know those spiritual truths? To actually have an openness to receive the divine love and good of God? To open our hearts to see differently -- see a situation differently? How do we do that?

I want to give you a really cool technique without all the description behind it. If you want to hear about that, come talk to me some other time. I will, but I want to do something with us right now. Are you up for that? Please say, "Yes!" [Congregation: "Yes!"] Good! [Laughs] Good!

So I want to tell you what we're going to do, and then we'll do it.

So in a moment, I'm going to ask you -- and don't do it quite yet, because I want you to pay attention here ... I'm going to ask you to close your eyes. And I'm going to ask you to take several deep, slow, intentional, focused breaths, doing your best to stay exclusively focused on the air coming in your nose and the air going out your nose.

Now, here's the deal. I'm only going to ask you to take three or four breaths like that. But I know in about breath one-and-a-half, your mind's going to go somewhere. Off it goes -- squirrel! It'll go to squirrel: grocery list; "to do" after work; the dog that's at home maybe peeing on the carpet. That was for you, Megan. [Laughs] Megan has a new puppy. [Laughs] Right? It's going to go. Gently, lovingly, just bring it back to focusing on the air coming in your nose cool, going out your nose a little warmer. Okay? That's all I'm going to ask you to do. And then I'm going to have you say something. Okay? Got it? We understand the assignment?

Alright. Eyes closed. And so take that deep, focused breath in. [Breathes deeply in] And out [Breathes slowly out] Focusing just on your breath, do that again. [Breathes deeply in and out] And again. If your mind has gone away, bring it gently, lovingly back. Two more times; deep breath in. [Breathes deeply in and out] Focus. Bring your mind back. Exquisite focus for this last breath in and out. [Breathes deeply in and out]

And keeping your eyes closed, I want you to bring to mind and look squarely in the face the obstacle that you identified earlier that's in front of you. And I want you silently to say to it -- silently -- *"There is a gift and an opportunity in you, and I am open to seeing it."*

Deep, focused breath in again. [Breathes in deeply] And out. [Breathes slowly out] One more time silently to yourself: *"There is a gift and an opportunity in you"* -- you meaning the obstacle -- *"and I am open to seeing it."*

Deep breath in. Focused out. And now silently say this: *"I no longer see you as an obstacle, but as the way to my expanded good."*

Deep breath in. Focused. Exhale. Open your eyes; come back to the room.

And now out loud, with some gusto, we're going to say that last sentence again. I'll chunk it down. Let me say the first part first; then you say it. Then I'll say the second part, and then maybe we'll say it all together after we do that.

Okay; here it goes. I want to hear it with some gusto, like you really mean it!

*"I no longer see you as an obstacle."*

[With congregation]: *"I no longer see you as an obstacle."*

*"But as the way to my expanded good."*

[With congregation]: *"But as the way to my expanded good."*

Can we do it all together? Here we go!

[With congregation]: *"I no longer see you as an obstacle, but as the way to my expanded good."*

And as we have seen it, so it is. Because that's the power of our perception! Namaste.

[Congregation whoops and applauds]

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