

Chapter 10

All things can work to the good.

St. Paul, when writing his letter of encouragement to the early Christian church in Rome included this line in the middle of his letter to them: “and we know that in *all things God works for the good* of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” Some ancient authorities suggest the translation should be “everything works for good for those who love Him” (taking out the reference to God directly doing the work) but whatever translation you read, the message is clear. It is a message of hope in a world that has too much pain and suffering and confusion and doubt. It is a message that encourages us to see beyond what we face in this messy and conflicted moment and to understand that even ugly and nasty things can somehow be transformed into something good. Whether you have a faith that attributes this transformation to God working in you (as St. Paul suggested) or you have no belief in a God at all, the core message, the central law of life remains: *all things can work to the good*. I imagine that you are very skeptical about this law or maybe already don’t believe it is possible or even true. If so, all I ask is that you read the next six paragraphs and then decide if this law just might be operative in your life and in all of our lives. If you feel it is, I encourage you to read the rest of this chapter.

Mind you, I am not suggesting “all things” *already do* “work to the good” of anyone in the sense that things, on their own, always just work out dandy. I don’t believe that and human history simply won’t support that kind of rose-colored view. Throughout history a plethora of things, many the products of the evil behavior of humans, have certainly *not* worked to the good of people if we leave these things unchanged. There are plenty of examples of horrifically evil deeds done by one human individual or group against another. Sadly, too often the perpetrators of these evils acted on completely misguided ideas of what they thought their idea of “God” wanted. There is no denying the horrors or the pain caused by these evils and it is foolish and simply wrong to say that these raw evils miraculously turn to good or “work to the good” on their own if we just give them time. They haven’t in the past. They don’t in the present. They won’t in the future.

In and of themselves events and situations have no intent to work either for someone’s gain or for loss. Situations, even ones that cause much suffering, are not conscious entities. They are simply the products of human or natural forces. In this way, situations are not evil or holy in themselves although the outcomes of situations or events can result in agony or ecstasy for the people affected by them. That is why, as we saw in Law # 6 *What you think determines what you feel*, events and situations (even if products of very evil human behavior) are called “neutral” entities to which you and I respond. “Neutral” means that the situation, itself, has no intent or ability to choose to effect good or ill—the situation is the product of other powers. If this power is human, however, then we can begin to attribute an intent for good or ill to that *human* agent but not to the situation, itself. Similarly, when we are on the receiving end of a situation (good or ill), our *human* choice of response makes all the difference. It is how you and I deal with

what we are handed, how we see it, think about it, and choose a response to it that can make “all things work to the good”.

Right about now I can imagine you are thinking about some very horrible chapters of human history and would like to throw them in my face with a “make some good come out of this one!” It is true. There are really quite terrible things that have happened and the saddest and, as above, the most terrible of these things are the ones created by the hands of other men and women. There is no denying the horrors. Yet, there is a power that you and I have, if we choose to use it, that can transform the worst imaginable suffering (at least part of it) into something better...even something good.

I do not mean that we can take an evil that has harmed many (e.g. any of the wars of the 20th century, Serbian genocide, 9/11, the Nazi Holocaust, African warlord slaughters, etc.) and just by wishing make it something good. I also do not mean that any level of effort will create a good from something terrible such that the *weight* of the good becomes equal to or outweighs the evil. I am not referring to a perfect exchange of good for evil or a magical erasure of the terror. That is not something any human can effect although I wish we could. I am referring, rather, to taking something you are given in life that is unjust, unkind, even tragic and attempting to mine from it something positive and powerful for your own life and something to share with others. Neither you nor I can transform an evil so that its memory is lost or so that all the damage it did is undone. That is for dreams. In terms of reality, however, I suggest that we have a choice. We can endure an evil complaining and moaning about it the rest of our lives and using it as our excuse for never being more than we currently are OR we can take the evil, even while despising it, and transform even a part of it into something that serves.

The Photographic Negative

In the days before color film and, later, digital photography, photography lab workers made black and white photographs from exposed camera film that was the negative image of the object or person depicted. Below, left, is a photographic negative of a picture I took of my dog Abby (the cutest dog in the world, in my opinion). If you look at this or any other negative film image, you see black everywhere white will appear when the photo is finally developed and white everywhere black will appear. The negative film



image is the polar opposite of reality. In this negative image of Abby, she doesn't look like the cute dog she actually is. This is a “negative” image of a “positive”—the way she actually looks when you see her. The film development process transforms the negative film image into a positive image that looks like Abby, at least in black and white (at right). See the end of this chapter for the same photo in



color. Unlike digital photography in which you immediately see the positive image, the old film development process took a lot of hard work and time to produce beautiful positive photographs from negative film images.

The photographic process of changing negatives into positives is an excellent analogy for this law of life, *All things can work to the good*. Life via its situations, people, and events hands you unpleasant conditions or outcomes. These are your “photographic negatives”. You can distill something positive from these IF you put the work and time in a transformative process somewhat like the film development process. This is why, above, I said that negative things don’t become positive all on their own. They can’t. They don’t have the power. They are just outcomes of situations that also don’t have their own power. Only you have the power. It is the power to intend, to will, to see beyond what you are handed and work to transform events. Things, events, and circumstances just don’t have the ability to change into anything other than what they are. You, however, are the agent of change. You are, in a sense, the photographic lab worker and it is up to you, if you choose to invest the work and time necessary, to effect the transformation. If humans have the power to create situations that cause much pain then humans also have the power to take those same situations and, from them, create much good. Let me share with you a very personal example of this.

A Personal Example

My mother and father married in 1949 not only because they thought they loved each other but also because, at 18 years old, she was pregnant. In those days, pregnant girls married the father of the child even if it was not a good idea. My mother later discovered that it definitely was not a good idea in her case but she was stuck and did the expected thing in that era: she married him. Nine months later, the newborn died at birth or shortly after, as did a set of twins one year later. My father’s name was Jim and many people called him Jimmy. After he graduated from high school, he served in the Korean Conflict and came home wanting to be a forester. He had always liked being outdoors hunting and fishing. In fact, he was out hunting or fishing when my mother was giving birth alone in a hospital and grieving the loss of her newborn children. People had to go find him to tell him what was happening because he was involved in what, apparently, he thought were more important or enjoyable activities outside. In 1951, they finally had a child who lived—my brother. My father insisted for my brother, as he had with the other children who did not live and with me, seven years later, that he pick the name. My mother wasn’t given much choice in the matter—Jim was a very controlling man. He picked the name. Later, in the mid 1950’s, my mother and Jim moved to Athens, GA where he went to the University of Georgia to pursue a degree in forestry. My mother had given up her plans for college (she wanted to be a physical therapist) because of her pregnancies and a need to support my brother and my father as he attended school. She worked in any job she could find. In 1958, I was born in Athens just before he finished school. A year later we moved to a small town in Georgia, about an hour south of Athens, where he started his first forestry job.

In addition to his love for outdoor activities, my father had a strong propensity to beat his wife, my mother, kick his bird dogs (sometimes into the electric fence he had erected around their fenced area in which they lived—electrocuting at least one) and “discipline” his sons. I never understood why he needed an electric fence around the already existing dog fence but—Jim was a very controlling man. My brother, seven years older than I, got the brunt of my father’s volcanic anger and various beatings for normal childhood infractions of Jim’s rigid ideas of what a young boy’s behavior “should” and “should not” be. I don’t know exactly and cannot imagine what my mother endured. I do know, though, that I got my share of Jim’s mean, brutal, and frightening whippings but being younger than six when he was around, I imagine my young age prevented me from receiving most of Jim’s paternal brutality. I suppose, for me, the deepest wounds were the psychological ones. I remember, for example, the sound of my father’s rubber soled forester boots on the hardwood hallway floors and knew that that squeaky sound was my alarm to hide in my closet, under my bed, or behind anything that happened to be around. Little boys really ought not to need or want to hide from their fathers but I did and, sadly, it served me well.

Jim was a perfectionist and hated disorder of any kind. His rigidity is burned into my brain in the form of a memory of being in the car with him and my brother. I was in the backseat. Jim decided to take us to some drive-through place that served milkshakes. Being about five years old at the time, when asked what I wanted, I said “a chocolate shake...and a big one.” Jim got me the largest chocolate milkshake they had and I was one happy camper in the backseat slurping away. About five minutes into slurping I got full—after all, I was only five years old. Nevertheless, Jim insisted that since I had said I wanted the largest milkshake that I had to, according to his “rules” drink the whole thing. I tried. I pushed as much down as I could, fearful of what would happen to me if I did not. My stomach overflowed with the now sickening milkshake and it felt as if it was almost at the level of the back of my throat. That choking sensation combined with the motion of the car as experienced in the backseat was just too much for me. Up came the milkshake all over the backseat floor carpet. My fate was sealed, I thought, and I started to cry in anticipation of Jim’s retribution. I was five but I was no dummy. I had seen, perhaps with my brother or mother, what happened in situations like that. I was not to be disappointed.

As soon as we got home, Jim broke off a branch of the Sweet Gum tree near our driveway and proceeded to beat me with it for having vomited in his orderly car. He chose to buy me the largest milkshake when any sane father would have known to buy a small one for such a small child. He forced me to drink the shake until I became sick and now I was being beaten with the branch of a tree for the natural results of *his* behavior. I hated and feared him for this and many similar scenes I could report but I think you are beginning to get the idea.

My mother, who had made the mistake of marrying this brutal, violent man, had the good sense to divorce him in November 1963. I had just turned six two months earlier, John Kennedy was assassinated later that month and I don’t remember any of the actual days at that time but I do remember that we moved to a small house down the street. I recall

the feeling of relief that Jim was no longer with us. I didn't miss him. I didn't love him. I never lived with him again.

Several years later I did visit him a couple of times (usually at the urging of his mother, my grandmother) when he had married his second wife, Helen. She seemed like a nice lady and had two children of her own she brought to the marriage. I remember her and her kids. I also remember her screams of "no, Jimmy, don't" that preceded the sound of his belt against her body behind the closed doors of their bedroom at night. One would think that Jim would save up his wife-beating for when his visiting son was not around to hear but he was much too out of control of his anger to do that. I remember the deep, visceral, sick feeling I felt when I heard her cries and I must have associated them with similar ones I had heard, several years before, from my mother and brother as they endured his physical abuse. My visits to him stopped. I was eight years old.

Jim and I had little or no relationship from that time on and the interchanges that did happen were stiff and uncomfortable on both sides. I put that aside, though, and invited him to the biggest day in my life up to that point: my ordination to the priesthood when I was 25. He didn't come and I don't remember even an acknowledgement that he received the invitation. When, at 32, I left the priesthood because I realized I just couldn't honestly handle celibacy, I decided to follow the example of my smart mother and I "divorced" Jim as well. He had insisted on naming me and I had always disliked the middle name he had forced my mother to accept and me to bear. I also disliked carrying his last name since I had no relationship with him, its original bearer. So I legally changed my middle and last names adopting my mother's maiden name of Grant as my last name and my maternal grandmother's maiden name of Maxwell as my middle name. That is something I wish I had done when I was 18.

Jim had a myocardial infarction and died in a hospital in 1997. I did not mourn his loss and, actually, never considered it a "loss". In many ways, I think not only I but also maybe others gained something by his death. I felt like I gained some sort of release. I had no real desire to go to his funeral but I went because his only sibling, a sister, my aunt, had always been kind to me throughout my life and I wanted to support her. Having had zero relationship with him all the preceding years, the idea of his "will" had never even crossed my mind. But, apparently, it did his. He made sure my brother, my aunt, and I (his only living blood relatives) were mentioned. Not surprisingly, he refused to honor my new legal name in his will and referred to me with the name he had given me at birth. He left each of us \$1 to ensure that none of us could contest his will by claiming that he failed to mention us in it, that it was an oversight, and that somehow we should get something of his estate. Controlling to the last, Jim left his very modest inheritance (of which I would have wanted no part anyway) to his third and last wife, Becky, as it should have been, I thought. I gave my dollar to her as well. I don't know how he treated Becky throughout their marriage but I can't imagine that it was much better than he treated his first two wives and his two sons. In some ways, I think she was released by his death, too, but may never have seen it or spoke of it that way. I can't imagine that she didn't feel some sense of relief, though.

Now the waste and senseless tragedy that was my father's life, all the hurt and shame and fear and wounding he caused me and others is a profound "negative" in my life and always has been...always will be. But, early on in my adult life, I slowly, sometimes grudgingly, came to an awareness that I could take all the negative that he was and transform it, somehow, into something positive for myself and others. I am certainly not claiming any great virtue or that I have done anything like a flawless job of transforming Jim's negative but overall I think I am doing a good job. This book you are reading about some basic laws of life that, I hope, is encouraging to you, the work I did as a Catholic priest (spiritual "father"), the work I have done in leadership development consulting/training, and the work I do now as a clinical psychologist—all of these are my attempts to give better than I got. They are my ways of transforming this negative (lack of a loving father, first leader, intimate coach, paternal teacher) in my life into a positive for my life and those with whom I work.

My childhood and poor fathering is certainly not the greatest tragedy that any human has endured and I don't hold it out as such. You may have much greater and longer lasting "negatives" in your life and I make no comparison of mine to yours or anyone else's. We all have unique experiences and must play the cards we are dealt. The most effective and most lasting way of "playing" these cards and the one that can produce the most positive impact for you and those in your life is to mine the negative for any positive. Take the ugly photographic negative and transform it into positive learning, positive change in your life, positive behaviors toward others, positive characteristics, etc. It doesn't matter if, like me, your efforts are imperfect. Nevertheless, it does matter that you try.

I can now say with all honesty that Jim has done a great deal of good in this world. Not because he did it directly, himself, but because his negative example has often inspired me (and maybe others) to do it. I have even asked myself in certain situations "what would Jim do?" and then I set about doing the complete opposite knowing that this approach would likely produce greater good. I have sometimes learned what the positive is by looking closely at his negative—much like the film development process. Yet I've made lots of mistakes, too, because: (a) I'm a very imperfect human; (b) it took me a while to make the shift in my thinking, and; (b) I didn't know some of the specific steps in the process of transforming negatives into positives. In case you, another imperfect human, are hoping to do some transforming, I want to present something that might help you with your own shift in thinking and then outline some of those specific transformation steps you can take. Don't be too concerned that you don't already know them. Lots of people don't. I don't think Jim did.

Pass It On or Pass It Through

In family situations like mine and in most others, we either "pass it on" or we "pass it through". "Passing it on" means that we are treated badly and then we simply pass on the bad treatment just like we got it with maybe a bit extra thrown in of our own. I have told you about my father. Now let me briefly tell you about his father. His name was, not surprisingly, Jim. My father's father was cruel and brutal to him like he was, later, to me.

My father hated his father so much that he ran away from home at 15 to find his mother, who had divorced him just as my mother would later divorce my father. The town where my father's mother lived was the same one where my mother and her family lived and where she went to high school. He also went to that same school, they later met there, and the rest of the story you already know. What you don't know is that my father also received poor, unloving, and brutal fathering. That is what he got and that is what he gave. He passed it right on without any improvement, modification, or attempt that I ever heard to try to do better. He was deeply angry about his father's treatment of him and he passed his anger on in his brutal behavior to his wives and two sons. He had no relationship with his father and...the wheel turns unless we stop it...his behavior toward us inspired us to have no relationship with him. He gave to us what he got and he recreated in himself the type of father he hated. Isn't there a better way? Do we have to just keep passing on the destruction from one generation to another like a genetic hot potato? Can't we do something different, something nobler, and something more loving? Yes. We can "pass it through".

"Passing it through" means that when we get something horrible done to us we don't just do the same to the next generation or the next person in line. It means we "pass it through" a process of transformation such that the negative is transmuted into a positive or, at least, that we mine all the positive we can out of the negative. That takes work, though, and there is the rub. Most people don't like the idea of that work or that they will be the one required to do it. I was recently talking about "passing it through" with a female patient who is having some problems with nasty comments made back and forth between her and her husband. I suggested that she "pass it through", that she not give like she gets, that she act like a transformative figure. Her response was "why do I have to be the noble one...why do I have to be the one who takes the high road?" I said, "you don't...you can keep doing what you are doing if you want...but just don't expect things to change if you do." She wants things to change and she wants her husband to do the work. Since he hasn't and, according to her, has no past history or future plan to do so, she resents being the "one". She wants a transformation of the negative into a positive but she doesn't want to put in the time or work. What do you think her marriage will be like in five years? Five minutes?

The fact is that negatives have a great deal to teach us and they can inspire us to learn things we never would have on our own. For example, I became interested in the topic of leadership and coaching not because I had great leaders/coaches at home or at school but precisely because I did not. Throughout my life I heard the word "leader" and heard the attributes of great leaders and then looked around at my memory of my father and my experiences with teachers and "leaders" in my life. I couldn't find one who qualified to even bear the title "leader". So I became interested. What is a leader? What do leaders say and do? I explored the topic. I did the same thing with the concept of "coach" since I never had one who even remotely deserved that title, either. The "coaches" in my life were men who wore cleats, chewed tobacco, had an office in the gym at school, and criticized everything done on any sports field. They didn't offer specific behavioral feedback. They didn't model the ideal way to punt, pass, kick, pitch, hit, etc. They didn't take the time to encourage and support and understand why a kid was having trouble

doing some sporting activity. They yelled. They shamed. They joined with other kids to laugh at the one struggling. Kid is still not doing better? Then apply more shame. Those weren't "coaches".

So what was a great coach, I thought? What was a great leader? What do they do, what do they say? I learned about that, and later became a leader and a coach myself. I then became a trainer of leaders and coaches and published articles about being good leaders and coaches that, hopefully, helped someone. So you see how even the *lack* of something like a father who was a good leader can inspire you to learn and attempt to be a good one yourself? As you do, you are "passing" the negative "through" the process of transformation. You are transforming your negative experience into something positive for you and for the people in your life. That is "passing it through". I want to be even more specific, though, and provide you, below, some very clear steps you can follow if you wish to transform some negative in your life into something good, if you are trying to make "all things work to the good".

Transformation

Step 1: Harness your anger. If you have been taught that anger is bad or sinful or wrong then you need to take some time and undo that thinking. As we saw in Law # 6, *What you think determines what you feel*, no human emotion is wrong. Each emotion we feel plays an important role in our lives and anger is no exception. Anger is the feeling of having been wronged, of having our rights trampled, of being unfairly infringed upon. It is a great emotion that tells us that our boundaries are being violated or that we are being threatened and need to respond. Feeling anger is not the problem. The problem is that most people don't know how to manage the anger they feel and act out their anger in ways that are unhealthy and immature. Our concept of the emotion of anger gets tarnished with all this bad behavior but the behavior is *not* the emotion of appropriate anger. Those poor behavioral choices are our maladaptive responses to the very good and helpful emotion of anger. If you feel angry about some negative in your life, then I suggest that you use the tools in the chapter dealing with Law # 6 to ensure that your anger is based on an accurate appraisal of the situation and is not an over the top emotion that is not based on reality. Once you are very sure that your anger is not the product of any of the distorted thinking, you can read about in that chapter, grasp your anger. Harness it as your source of energy to motivate you to undertake the work of transforming the negative in your life into something positive.

Step 2: Get clear about the negative you seek to transform. If the negative in your life is fuzzy to you or you are not clear about it, it will be tough to transform. Do you remember the negative photographic image of Abby? If it had been very blurry, it would not have produced a clear, crisp positive. The negative in your life is the same. If you are not very certain you understand it even in all its negativity and injustice, it will be much harder for you to work to transform it. So dig into it, ask others for clarification, and make sure you are very clear about this negative. You will need this clarity because in the next step that clear negative image will tell you exactly what you must do to transform it into a positive one.

Step 3: Determine the photographic positive of this negative. Once you have gotten very clear about the negative you can now use the details of it to help you create a very specific positive. Make a list of each negative element/behavior in one column on a piece of paper and then, in another column next to the first, the totally opposite positive element/behavior that you want to see. For each positive ask yourself what specific things will you need to say, do, think, or feel (all four are behaviors) to start making that positive a reality? Write them down.

Step 4: Create a plan. Look at your list of behaviors needed to create the positives and start organizing them into either their importance or the order you want to start working on them. Create a little plan for yourself with some dates attached to each positive behavior, how you will track progress, measure success, etc. Start with just one, start small, and once you have some success there, start with your next one. Share what you are trying to transform with others who are supportive of you and ask for help, suggestions, and ideas whenever you need them.

Step 5: Reward yourself frequently. We saw in Law # 2 that *You get more of what you reward*. Make sure you reward yourself for each bit of progress you make in changing each negative element into a positive. Whatever you do to make the transformation, give yourself some positive feedback and share what you are doing with your support team to hear their positive feedback. You need to get some sense of reinforcement and reward for what you are doing so that you will take on the next little piece that needs transforming. Make the transformation process a series of personal rewards to yourself in every step—that will help keep you on track and ensure that you follow through with the whole process.

Step 6: Guard your expectations. It is very, very unlikely that you will be able to transform the entirety of the negative into a positive. As we discussed, there is no way you can erase some of the damage done by the negative so make sure you aren't expecting to do that. The negative will probably continue to live in your memory and you may continue to daily deal with its results. You will likely not be able to make all of that go away. So, guard your expectations, and let the lasting memory or results of the negative remind you that you will need to keep working away at transformation. In some ways, the memory of the negative is a good thing: it keeps you focused on making the daily positive changes.

Step 7: Admire what you have transformed. As you transform each little negative element or behavior into a positive one, admire what you have done. See how the positive impacts yourself, others, your world. See how the next little change builds on the first. Notice how the constellation of all the transformative changes you have made works together to create a true good out of the evil with which you started. Take note of how the photographic positive you have created radiates outward like ripples touching the lives of more than you could have imagined. Admire the power of your transformation and let echo through your mind the truth of this law of life: *All things can work to the good*.

