



Shefali Tripathi Mehta, June 15, 2014, DHNS:;

- JUN 14 2014, 22:24 IST
- UPDATED: JUN 14 2014, 22:24 IST



There are more real life stories of people who prevail against adversity than we care to count. DH illustration

Believe it or not, we are averse to stepping out of our comfort zones. Our system and culture too encourage us to play safe. However, there is no dearth of positive role models around us, people who have overcome daunting struggles and setbacks to fulfil their life's purpose. Shefali Tripathi Mehta recounts a few such inspiring stories...

Udaan, a popular TV serial of the late 80s, the story of a conscientious village girl who aspires to be and becomes an IPS officer, was perhaps the most inspiring serial in the history of Indian television.

The imagination of every child and young person growing up during that time was fired by the story of Kalyani Singh, the upright police officer with high ideals; her resolve to regain her family's respect; and her fight against an unjust system and blatant gender

discrimination.

Udaan was based on the true story of Kanchan Chaudhary Bhattacharya, the first woman IPS officer to become Director General of Police, and elder sister of Kavita Chaudhary who wrote, directed and played her in the TV serial.

There are more real life stories of people who prevail against adversity than we care to count.

When we look around, it does seem like the world is full of tales of grief and adversity and life is a constant struggle riddled with disappointment, despair and uncertainty.

There are also stories of hope and triumph; stories of people who have emerged victorious through unimaginably hopeless circumstances, but their journeys appear incredible.

We are awed and inspired but cannot see ourselves in their shoes.

That they prevailed over adversity does not mean we would too.

Faith slips away from the back door as soon as adversity comes knocking. Bankruptcy; serious illness; loss of job, a dear one or a relationship, adversity comes without forewarning.

Who are the people who successfully tide over the storms? Is their DNA different from ours? Or upbringing singular?

Endurance is key

Not many have heard of Franz Gastler. An American, Gastler began teaching English to children in a small village in Jharkhand, Hutup, near Ranchi, and was instrumental in sending the team of Under-14 for the Gasteiz Cup football tournament in Victoria Gasteiz, Spain, where they finished third.

Jharkhand ranks poorly when it comes to child marriage, human trafficking and female literacy. Gastler happened to ask a 12-year old girl, his best pupil in the English class, what she would like to do in her free time.

“Play football,” she replied. He decided to coach a group of kids and ended up founding the NGO Yuwa when he realised that the sport could instil confidence and promote education among these girls.

The girls were so passionate about playing football that when asked what they needed, they said they only wanted a place to play and that they would save to buy the ball.

They faced parental opposition and community disapproval for wasting their time and doing what was the preserve of boys.

When they went to the Panchayat office to get birth certificates for their passport, they were reportedly slapped and forced to sweep floors.

Eventually, this group of tribal girls achieved something that sportspersons with the best facilities and support in big cities cannot always do.

Gastler does not rate talent as the key for success, nor does he think that hunger, passion or desire is enough. Endurance, he states, is the primary factor — the capacity to withstand all odds, which this story completely corroborates.

Sometimes, adversity itself may be the motivation for someone to take on a challenging task. For 22 years, one man worked non-stop carving a road through a mountain.

The people of Dashrath Manjhi's village in Bihar had requested the government for a road through a mountain that would give them faster and easier access to market, hospital and school.

The government did not pay heed. Dashrath Manjhi's wife, Falguni Devi, died of illness because she could not be taken to the nearest hospital that was 70 km away every time she needed medication.

In 1960, Dashrath Manjhi started carving with a hammer and a chisel, a road through the mountain. Working non-stop till 1982, he successfully dug out a 360-foot-long and 30-foot-wide path through the mountain.

Dashrath Manjhi's story is about how if one decides, one can move mountains, literally. What motivates people?

Why do some people undertake unfamiliar, risky ventures? What is their motivation — financial reward, fame or altruism?

Anil Joshi, an Ayurvedia in Fatehgarh village of Madhya Pradesh, was moved by the plight of the farmers of the village who faced severe drought year after year.

When he proposed the idea of building a check dam on the local River Somli, the farmers laughed it off. Undeterred, Joshi collected rupee one each from about one lakh people.

With the amount — Rs 92, 000, Joshi and the villagers worked together and built a check dam on the river which changed the course of their lives.

It helped irrigate the area and the villagers reclaimed their livelihood.

This success showed him the way and Joshi has since built a dozen such check dams.

While some people are moved by the plight of others, there are some who just cannot silence their inner voice or close their eyes to wrong.

Thirty-one-year-old Jazeera, a mother of three from Madayi village in Kannur, Kerala could not watch silently the sand mafia denuding the beaches of her village.

Not only did she fight this without others' support, she did this with the knowledge that her own brother was involved in the sand-mining offence.

Finding the state government's response wanting, she even took her protest to the Union environment minister in Delhi.

We know of Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa who lived and worked for others.

There is the example of Neelam Katara, Sabrina Lal and Rajendar Kachroo who fought all odds to not just get justice for their kin, but to restore our faith in the law and justice of the land.

There are a million unsung heroes and good Samaritans too who pay no heed to the repercussion they may face for doing a good deed they must do.

When a person drops everything he's doing to help an accident victim; when an auto rickshaw driver returns valuable documents or a loaded wallet; when a person offers the traffic cop water in the heat, they are all stepping out of their comfort zones, reaching out to fellow human beings and putting into motion the cycle of good dharma, good karma.

Two decades ago, I failed to do right and shall regret it for the rest of my life. As a young mother, I dropped a case of rash driving against a DTC bus when the case was making the capital's headlines.

I dropped it because I was scared of the threats, the police that came to my house, the risk people said I would put my baby to. Cowardice can come disguised as foolhardiness. I learnt a lesson.

"I have not always chosen the safest path. I've made my mistakes, plenty of them. I sometimes jump too soon and fail to appreciate the consequences. But I've learned something important along the way: I've learned to heed the call of my heart. I've learned that the safest path is not always the best path and I've learned that the voice of fear is not always to be trusted." (Steve Goodier)

Face up to failure

A cancer survivor says she loathes it when people tell her she is being so brave, for she has no option but to be so. But we do know of people with grave illnesses who give up in their hearts so no outside help can reach or heal them.

When life pushes us into a corner, we have to choose to face up to adversity.

Amit Banerjee was an engineering student when his family suffered a huge financial setback and there was no money to pay for his education.

After facing several job rejections and hunger, he decided to start a business that did not require too much initial investment.

He started creating websites, working in his balcony on a broken laptop and failed miserably in the first three attempts.

But, eventually, his perseverance paid off and he could repay his family's debt. Today, he has a job with a multinational. Amit Banerjee faced failure repeatedly. But he had no option but to keep trying.

In his autobiography, Wings of Fire, former president, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam recounts the incident when he did not succeed in joining the Indian Air Force. Crestfallen, he went to meet Swami Shivananda.

This is what the Swami advised, "Desire, when it stems from the heart and spirit, when it is pure and intense, possesses awesome electromagnetic energy.

This energy is released into the ether each night, as the mind falls into sleep state. Each morning it returns to the conscious state, reinforced with the cosmic currents.

That which has been imagined will surely and certainly be manifested... Accept your destiny and go ahead with your life... What you are destined to become is not revealed now, but it is predetermined. Forget this failure as it is essential to lead you to your destined path. Search, instead, for the true purpose of your existence..."

Failure, then, only indicates that we are being led to a different, often more fulfilling path or destiny.

There is no dearth of positive role models around us, people who have overcome daunting struggles and setbacks to fulfil their life's purpose.

We have a former president, Dr Kalam, who sold newspapers and now we have Prime Minister Modi who helped at his father's tea stall.

Not to forget another former prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, who as a young schoolboy in Kashi could not afford the two rupees a month he had to pay the boatman to cross the Ganga to reach his school and so would swim across the river daily.

Another inspiring story is that of the owner of the Sukh Sagar chain of restaurants that is today spread over Mumbai, Bangalore, Mysore, Chennai and the Middle East.

In 1962, 10-year-old Suresh Poojari came to Mumbai from a village near Udipi in Karnataka. He worked as help at small eateries.

It was as a waiter at the Bombay Port Trust canteen where he earned Rs 6 per month that he began to learn the rules of the enterprise and dream of his own restaurant.

The first Sukh Sagar he opened was on a small table on which he sold fresh juices from a hand-operated juicer.

He quickly expanded and became successful offering simple vegetarian street food which he kept reasonably-priced and fresh.

Today, he owns not just the Sukh Sagar chain of restaurants, but also a shopping mall, a three-star hotel and an ice-cream factory.

Understanding adversity

We have Moral Science, Socially Useful Productive Work and Needle Work in school but no lessons to teach how to deal with adversity.

In class four, my classmate lost her father. When she returned to school in a couple of months, she was a changed person.

The shock had stunned her into an impregnable silence. She did not talk, study or play, just sat on the last bench, shorn of emotion. Eight and nine-year-olds do not know how to reach out to a grieving classmate.

We may have attempted to pull her into our fold initially, but must have soon thought her weird and left her to her own devices.

When I look back, I wonder what the adults were doing. Why were they letting a young girl be thus consumed by her grief?

Why did no one help her or make us draw her out of her seclusion?

We are ill-equipped to deal with our own or other people's loss or misfortune.

Just like death is not talked about in our culture, misfortune is also met with shock and disappointment.

There is helplessness and shame in adversity.

The blame is on fate or karma and there is little emotional support or help.

An illness is enough to make one aware of everything one takes for granted — a walk, going to work or a family outing.

It is when life slows us down that we begin to appreciate and examine life.

All those who have been through major illnesses have emerged stronger in mind and body.

|
Nick Vujicic was born without limbs and he struggled with physical and emotional issues till he decided to turn his disability into his ability.

Today, Nick Vujicic is perhaps the world's most well-known motivational speaker who has addressed over three million people in over 44 countries.

Adversity builds character. We need challenges to grow. Haruki Murakami puts it beautifully, "Once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over.

But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."