

**12@12**  
**Embracing Discomfort**  
**November 13, 2014**

When I was a child I remember thinking how impressive it was to run a marathon. The races in those days did not have thousands upon thousands and did not feature too many weekend warriors. If you ran in a marathon it was because you took running seriously. As marathons became the thing to do, however, the bar had to be raised for the real endurance athletes. The Iron Man competition was born and a marathon was tacked on to the end of 2.4-mile swim and a 112-mile bike ride. But then came the time when triathlons were a bit too common place and the ultramarathon was born. These races can extend to 100 miles or more and may ask runners to run for 24 hours straight. One of the most famous of the ultramarathons is called Badwater. It is located in Death Valley, California. It starts 282 feet below sea level and climbs to as high as 8,360 feet. The race is 135 miles long with temperatures as high as 120 degrees.

One of the most well-known participants of the Badwater Ultramarathon is Dean Karnazes. He has completed the race seven times, winning it in 2004 at the age of 41. But I am not sure that this is the most impressive of Karnazes' accomplishments. He has run marathons in fifty states on fifty consecutive days. He once ran 350 miles in 3-1/3 days without stopping. He's run across the Australian outback, Antarctica, and the Sahara desert. In other words, this guy is crazy. Crazy in an outstanding way.

Now, what I have found is that when someone is crazy outstanding in whatever arena there is usually something significant behind their behavior. There is some defining moment or ethos of life that compels them and drives them. I cannot be sure what that is for Karnazes, but he certainly hints at it. In an interview with *Outdoor* magazine, he writes:

Western culture has things a little backwards right now. We think that if we had every comfort available to us, we'd be happy. We equate comfort with happiness. And now we're so comfortable we're miserable. There's no struggle in our lives. No sense of adventure. We get in a car, we get in an elevator, it all comes easy. What I've found is that I'm never more alive than when I'm pushing

and I'm in pain, and I'm struggling for high achievement, and in that struggle I think there's a magic.<sup>1</sup>

Those words are impressive, but they are a little hard to swallow, aren't they? They are hard to swallow because as those who have been influenced by Western culture we have often succumbed to the almost exclusive pursuit of comfort, not recognizing that in the process we might be missing out what we are really looking for.

With that, I want to share with you two thoughts about embracing discomfort, and they are thoughts that I am in part borrowing from Michael Hyatt, who has written an article on the topic.<sup>2</sup>

This first thought is this: comfort is overrated. Probably all of us have a place we like to sit in our homes. It is the place we like to put up our feet, drink our favorite beverage, and watch our favorite program or sporting event. That place is where we like to end up after a hard day's work or a week of deadlines. It's our "easy chair." And there is nothing wrong with ending up in that place. I would guess, however, that for none of you is that place your happiest place. It's not the place you find the greatest satisfaction or joy. It's not where you find the sense of a job well done, or the richness of relationship, or the pleasure of giving someone a helping hand. Yet despite the easy chair's inability to help us arrive at any of these places, we have hard time not being drawn to it even when we are not in real need of rest or refueling.

But the inability of the easy chair to deliver on so many important fronts is not the only reason it is overrated. It is also overrated because it can easily pull us in some really bad directions—directions that lead to laziness or incessant boredom and malcontent or even bad roads we would have never taken otherwise. A short biography of one of the early kings of Israel, named David is included in the Bible. It speaks of his early conquests and his great willingness to be uncomfortable in the pursuit of what was worthwhile. Once he had well established his kingdom, however, he chose not to go to battle one spring, but to stay in the confines of the comfortable palace he had built. It is reported that one day during that spring he looked out from his palace and saw a woman bathing. She was a married woman. He called for her anyway, and he slept with her. And afterwards she became pregnant. She was married to a decorated war hero who was off at war. There was no way

to blame the pregnancy on him. And so David had her husband purposely put in the way of harm and killed.<sup>3</sup> It was not long until David's actions were exposed, and as you might imagine it was at that point that his reign began to unravel. And it all started because he overrated the pursuit of comfort.

So comfort is overrated, but it is also good to see the other side of the coin, which is that discomfort can be a considerable catalyst for growth. Alan Hirschman, one of the leading economists of the last half century recalls the development of the Karnaphuli Paper Mills in Bangladesh. The mill was built to exploit the vast and nearby bamboo forests, but soon after the mill was built the bamboo forests unexpectedly flowered and then died, something which apparently happens every fifty years or so. Without the bamboo forest, the new, multimillion mill was suddenly without the raw material it needed.

But the Hirschman notes the response to the crisis. He discovered that the developers of the mill found news ways to bring in bamboo from villages throughout Bangladesh through the country's many waterways. They also experimented with new kinds of faster growing bamboo and found other kinds of lumber products that would work just as well. In the end the plant had a far more diversified base of raw materials than had ever been considered. If the discomfort of the dead bamboo forest not happened, the developers of the mill would not have been forced to come up with the solutions that actually brought greater value to the plant.<sup>4</sup>

When the financial crisis hit in 2008, not only did the private sector get hit, but so did many non-profits including churches like ours. And while certainly it put many places of worship that rely on charitable donations in a difficult place, I also heard and read that for many the reduction in giving actually proved to be a good thing. It proved to be good because it forced many to consider what was really essential to what they did. Any organization can get "fat and happy" if it does not watch out, and discomfort is one of the catalysts to keeping us on track towards lean and healthy growth. And this, of course, is true not just for organizations but for individuals as well. In a letter written to the newly founded Christian church in Rome, Paul, perhaps the central leader in early Christianity, penned these words, "Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and

endurance, character, and character, hope.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, he wrote, “We don’t decry discomfort, we embrace, it because we know that through it comes growth.”

So what’s the bottom line in what I have shared today? The bottom line is that as much as we might be drawn to comfort, and while it might be just fine to enjoy it from time to time, as a life pursuit it falls short. It falls short in growing us to become the people we can become. It falls short in stretching us to do the things we can do. It falls short in leading us to places of deeper satisfaction. It falls short in helping us lead the organizations we lead to better places. So the next time there is a bump in the road or you recognize that something is going to be difficult or uncomfortable, don’t head for the easy chair. Instead hit the road like Dean Karnazes.

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<sup>1</sup> Katie Arnold, “[Drafting Dean: Interview Outtakes.](#)”

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hyatt, “[Why Discomfort is Good for You.](#)”

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 11:1-27

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, “[The Gift of Doubt: Albert O. Hirschman and the Power of Failure.](#)”

<sup>5</sup> Romans 5:4