

## **The Danger of Drowning** *Dealing with Emotions in a Midlife Crisis*

It was 1974 and I was working on the border of the Sahara desert in the West African nation of Niger as Director for a relief agency. There was a terrible drought underway and great numbers of people were suffering terribly. By the tens of thousands, they traveled by foot for hundreds of miles to reach the refugee camps. They were exhausted, starving, and many were near death, especially the elderly and the children. One of my first tasks as the new Director was to visit those camps where our agency was active.

At the first camp, I met a nurse who was responsible for providing medical assistance to the 35,000 refugees who had arrived and the hundreds of others arriving every day. She was shocked by their health status and the enormity of the task ahead of her, but she had gone right to work. It was a huge responsibility to put a system into place with grossly inadequate resources while living in the midst of starving people. Getting her the resources she needed was at the top of my priority list, but she had done wonders with what she had. She didn't surrender to the emotions that battered her every day. She focused on what she had and she worked with it.

A few days later, I was sitting in a tent at another camp with another nurse. Her camp was similar and she faced the same tragic situation as the first nurse. Tears streaming down her face, she told me she had to leave, she just couldn't deal with it. She knew there would be no one to replace her for some weeks and she knew she was desperately needed, but she couldn't believe that she could help anyone under the circumstances. Her emotions were completely in control and she was close to a breakdown. I made arrangements for her departure and thanked her sincerely for all she had done in the weeks before.

As we pass through life, we inevitably face personal and professional crises. We usually feel inadequate and in danger of failure. If we didn't, it wouldn't be a "crisis", would it? These crises may not be as dramatic as the one described above, but each in its own way is just as frightening to us at the moment we face it. Just like the two nurses mentioned, we choose how to use our emotions in a time of crisis. One nurse put her emotions aside, took inventory of what she had, and

decided to do what she could until more help arrived. Then she used her emotions to drive her work. The other drowned in her emotions, dismissed the resources she had available as inadequate, and gave up. Her emotions destroyed her work.

If you're facing a real crisis, you're bound to be emotional. But no matter how limited they may seem; you have resources. You're alive, you're intelligent, you have access to the Internet, and you're reading this essay in your search for additional resources, just for starters. You have a choice. You can put your emotions aside, take the resources you have, plan a course of action, and then use your emotions to support your plan. Or you can drown in your own emotions, never have a plan, and give up.

One very important purpose of this site is to convince you, if you need convincing, that the first approach is the one that works. Many of the other essays here deal with this directly or indirectly. In the weeks to come, I plan to add additional suggestions and ideas on the subject of using emotion to build a new life, not destroy an old one, at this site and in my newsletter.

I have a final story to share. One of those nurses was American, the other Canadian. It is not important as to who was what, but they both were blessed with resources. There was a third nurse too, an African nurse who worked in a tiny, hot, mud brick building in a town near the first camp I mentioned. She hadn't been paid her salary in months, as her government agency was effectively bankrupt. She had no drugs, no bandages, and no resources other than a desk, a table, some chairs, and an ancient filing cabinet. The last time she had received supplies a month before, they amounted to one bottle of ninety aspirin. That was it. Can you imagine what that must have been like, week after week, month after month?

But she was there every day and had a reputation for doing amazing things to find some way to help the sick that came to her. She begged without shame from anyone who could help. She collected rags for bandaging. She never deserted her patients. They said that even when someone died in her office, she didn't desert them. She saw to it that their families were found and their bodies returned.

I had heard this and was determined that she would benefit from our resources, although she was officially outside our program. I will not forget walking into her tiny office that day 27 years ago. She saw what was obviously a "rich foreigner", stood up, broke into a warm smile, and said, "How can I help you?"



We can use our emotions to move forward, no matter how desperate the crisis. We don't have to drown in them. It's our choice.