

*When I am weak, then I am strong—the less I have,
the more I depend on him.*

2 Corinthians 12:10

Crisis of Confidence

Marlene Bagnull

Suddenly everything seemed to be getting in the way of my writing. Other things, good things, were demanding time and energy. I didn't see how I could say no. When I walked past my office and felt a twinge of guilt, I told myself my hectic schedule was only temporary. Besides, I couldn't let people down when they were depending on me.

One day Anne Sirna, my writing mentor, helped me to see what was happening. "You're running from the very thing you most want to do," she said. "You're running from your writing. Don't you see?" she explained, when I looked puzzled. "New writing opportunities are stretching before you and, to put it bluntly, you're scared. You're protecting yourself from the possibility of failure by becoming so involved with other things that you have an excuse not to write."

She's right. I am afraid of failure, I admitted to myself. I don't have confidence in my writing ability. And I have been saying yes to other things to avoid having to prove myself.

"It's a cop-out to see yourself as a failure," she continued, as if reading my thoughts. "You've served your apprenticeship. It's time to move on—to make a commitment to being successful even though success is a lonely and risky thing."

Everyone who is serious about writing will face similar turning points when the choice must be made—move ahead or turn back. Repeatedly, we will be forced to ask ourselves whether or not we are willing to risk failure, if doing God's will is more important to us than the acceptance and approval of men.

It is not just beginning writers who feel anxious when starting a new project, or mailing a completed manuscript. Even established writers know their work may not be accepted. Success brings with it a heavier responsibility to produce quality work. Self-expectations, as well as the expectations of editors, become greater. At any moment a "crisis of confidence," as Anne calls it, can occur.

It can be triggered by many things. We may feel trapped in an interminably long period of writers' block. An editor may require a rewrite of something we felt was our very best work. A manuscript we were sure would be accepted may be returned. It may even be a manuscript we wrote on assignment. I remember when that happened to me. I was devastated! Besides the blow to my ego, I felt I had let the editor down. He expected me to produce something he could use.

I had reached one of those turning points. I could choose to play it safe and turn down future assignments. I could accept them (and even seek them) despite my feelings of inadequacy. Or, I could give up and quit.

I remember flipping through the pages of my Bible. Colossians 1:29 leaped out: “This is my work, and I can do it only because Christ’s mighty energy is at work within me.”

Knowing that Paul wrote those words from prison made them even more meaningful to me. I imagined how the Evil One must have used that time to try to persuade Paul to question his call. Surely he did not miss the opportunity to remind Paul of past failures, as well as the times of hardship and hostility. Paul’s spirit had absorbed rebuffs and criticism, even from fellow Christians. His body carried the scars of beatings and lashings.

“Is it worth it?” Satan must have whispered more than once. “If God really called you to be a missionary, then why is he allowing you to rot here in prison?”

But Paul chose to remain true to his call to spread the Good News by writing letters that might otherwise not have been written. “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,” he wrote (Phil. 12 NIV).

But Paul met the Lord on the Damascus Road, I thought to myself. He knew Jesus more intimately than I do.

Yes, I could argue that Paul had a greater measure of faith because of these experiences. Yet he also knew what it meant to go from tremendous spiritual highs to deep lows and to be plagued with a thorn in his flesh. If, as some commentators suggest, Paul had epilepsy or an eye disease, it must have caused him to wrestle with doubts. How could he preach if he might have a seizure, or write if he could not see?

God did not remove the thorn. Instead, he told Paul, “I am with you; that is all you need. My power shows up best in weak people” (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul chose to rely on this promise and to affirm: “When I am weak, then I am strong—the less I have, the more I depend on him” (2 Cor. 12:10).

The cure for a crisis of confidence is to re-examine in what, or more importantly, in whom, we have placed our confidence. “I know the one in whom I trust,” Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:12). That’s the key. It’s not self-confidence, but God-confidence!

“Stir into flame the strength and boldness that is in you,” Paul counseled Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6). Does that mean he expected Timothy never to be afraid? No! “I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling,” Paul admitted to the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor. 2:3). And he didn’t go to Corinth until his second missionary journey!

“Stand steady, and don’t be afraid of suffering for the Lord,” Paul encouraged Timothy. “Bring others to Christ. Leave nothing undone that you ought to do” (2 Tim. 4:5). The NIV reads, “discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

If a crisis of confidence is holding you back from the work you know you have been called to do, it’s time to acknowledge that it’s not self-confidence you need but God-confidence. It’s time to learn what it means “to be a living demonstration of Christ’s power, instead of showing off [your] own power and abilities” (2 Cor. 12:9). And instead of running from opportunities to serve the Lord, you need to continue to focus your life and your ministry on the “firm, tested, precious Cornerstone that is safe to build on. He who believes need never run away again” (Isa. 28:16).

Responding to God's Call to Write

Fear of failure, rejection, writer's block, or not measuring up, can all create a paralyzing crisis of confidence. Read and reflect on the following antidotes to fear, noting beside each reference how God is personally speaking to you.

Psalm 9:10

Psalm 16:8

Psalm 25:3

Psalm 34:4

Isaiah 41:10

Philippians 1:6

1 John 4:18

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