

Setback

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Déjà vu all over again

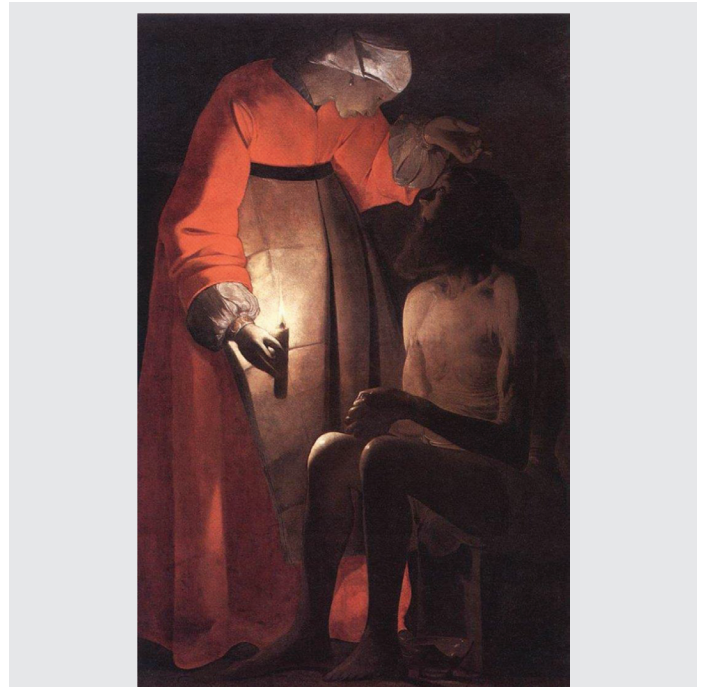
Consider the Book of Job in the Old Testament. Satan points out to God that it's easy for prosperous people to "keep the faith" since they are comfortable in their lives. What would happen if everything they had were taken away? Would they still worship God? God takes the bait and selects the righteous Job as His test. He gives Satan permission to bring Job to his knees, but not to his death.

In Job:1–2, in a series of setbacks, Job's thousands of livestock were carried off by raiders, his servants were killed, and his ten children were crushed by a falling house.

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. He said, "Naked came I from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."¹

God rebukes Satan; Job has not turned away from Him even in his misery. Satan ups the ante and afflicts Job with "loathsome sores" that cause him to itch unbearably and to wish he had never been born. Job's wife admonishes him, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!" Job remains steadfast, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak."¹

French artist Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) captures the dramatic moment at which Job's wife confronts him in his painting *Job Mocked by his Wife* (ca.1625–1650).² In this contemplative scene, his wife stands over the tormented Job as he sits among the ashes. She holds the only light source, a candle, at the painting's midpoint, directing the viewer's eyes to Job's ravaged body. She leans over him, her left hand in a questioning position above his head as he



Georges de La Tour (1593–1652). *Job Mocked by his Wife*. Ca.1650
Musée départemental d'art ancien et contemporain, Épinal, France²

turns his face upward toward her. Although he criticizes her as a "foolish woman," remember that she has lost her children seemingly for no reason, save his faith in God. This intimate moment reveals the bewilderment they both must feel. De La Tour treats this sacred subject realistically, using richly colored but simple garments, and isolating husband and wife effectively in deep shadow.

Job eventually protests the injustice of his suffering to God, who responds with a series of descriptions of His creations, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have

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understanding.”¹ Although God does not address the injustice of suffering by righteous men, Job “repents in dust and ashes.”¹ God restores Job’s health, provides more livestock, and grants him new children. (The Bible doesn’t mention how his wife felt about replacement children.)

Job suffered from his setbacks, relying on his faith in God to endure. In the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946),³ James Stewart plays George Bailey, a man who experiences so many personal and financial setbacks that, like Job, he wishes he had never been born. Angel Second Class Clarence Odbody intervenes in George’s attempted suicide and shows him what life in Bedford Falls would have been like had George never existed. George understands that his life has worth, Clarence restores George’s original life, and all’s well that ends well.

In a thoughtful article in *The Atlantic*, Megan Garber explores the movie first as “a meditation on dashed dreams” then as a darker foray into the “being tested” scheme of things.⁴ She recalls George’s first childhood setback, deafness in one ear resulting from an infection brought on by jumping into icy water to save his brother from drowning. This foreshadows George’s subsequent setbacks—circumstances conspire to keep him from his dreams of world travel.

His father’s stroke keeps George from leaving Bedford Falls as a young man. College plans are put on hold due to financial insolvency at his family’s bank; George takes over the business and stays in Bedford Falls. The iconic scene of Mary and George on the phone talking to a mutual friend tests George’s resolve once again. He wants to leave, but his love for Mary forces his hand. George gives in, angrily stating, “I want to do what I want to do!” as he shakes a weeping Mary. Honeymoon plans are thwarted when a run on the bank compels George to remain on the premises. A few years later, George’s brother Harry plans to take over the bank when he returns to Bedford Falls; finally, a chance for George (and Mary) to leave. Once again, George’s dream is dashed when he learns that Harry has taken a job in another city.

Megan Garber maintains that “the film is charged with a sense of ambient despair,” as George is “tested and tested and tested, with a notable absence of relief



It's a Wonderful Life. 1946. Theatrical poster. RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.

or reward.”⁴ He understands that he is to be compliant and resilient in the face of sacrifice. Ms. Garber likens George’s trials to the setbacks people experience now in the current stage of the Covid-19 pandemic and its variants. “The chance leaders had to do the bare minimum to forestall the planet’s furies has been squandered once again,” she writes. “American democracy, new and ever-fragile, is under threat once more. George Bailey was never just George Bailey; he has always doubled as a collection of decidedly American metaphors. This year, though, he looks more like an omen.”⁴ Will individual sacrifices be rewarded? Unvaccinated and maskless people may think not. Will communities come together for the common good? The outlook seems doubtful. Ms. Garber suggests that everyone is vulnerable to the “twists of history.”

The current twist of history is the rapid spread of the omicron variant of Covid-19. In a *New York Times* article, Patricia Mazzei states that in careening into year three of the Covid-19 pandemic, “Americans are sick

and tired of being sick and tired.”⁵ Hospitals are still coping with surges of cases (most of whom are unvaccinated⁶), health care personnel themselves are ill or simply burned out, businesses face staffing shortages due to illness, airlines are cancelling flights for lack of staff, parents worry as schools debate in person or virtual classes. George Bailey’s American metaphors of individual sacrifice and communities banding together for the common good seem relegated to those long-ago days.

Science reporter Katherine J. Wu understands the public’s confusion by the latest isolation and testing guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its 1,800-word update is less than clear; she sums it succinctly, “Hunker down for five days instead of the typical ten, then do what you want.”⁷ She agrees that that’s overly simplistic, but her longer summary reflects her description of the guidelines as “a nightmarish choose-your-own-adventure book.”⁷ The experts she interviewed offered opinions ranging from “unnecessarily confusing” to “it’s a hot mess.”⁷ Ms. Wu would support Megan Garber’s bemoaning the squandering of leadership during this crisis; she suggests that the CDC is putting the responsibility of infection control into the hands of the public, and that rather than trying to parse the mixed messages of the guidelines, people may simply give up.

In the face of these current physical and psychological setbacks, people often turn to therapists for help with the general anxiety and depression caused by the pandemic. Unfortunately, as Tara Parker-Pope and colleagues report, their survey responses indicate there are too few therapists available for this “second pandemic” of mental health problems.⁸ Demand for help is surging, waiting lists for appointments are long, and need for medications is increasing. Perhaps most alarming are difficulties related to families; therapists report that children’s mental health issues are intensifying and that couples are struggling.⁸

Similar to the burdens faced by hospital personnel, therapists also face their own setbacks of burnout and compassion fatigue. Grief counselor Claudia Coenen stated, “We’re holding other people’s emotions, their sadness, their sorrow, and their stress.”⁸ According to marriage and family therapist Leah Seeger, the

situation will get worse before it gets better, “These ripple effects are going to be affecting us for some time. I believe I will be helping people navigate the effects of the pandemic for the rest of my career.”⁸

Therapists look to state and federal intervention to meet the needs of their patients. Survey responses point out that financial and insurance issues hinder patient care; working with insurance companies and/or Medicaid can be troublesome for both patient and therapist. State and federal funding could provide public clinics, and loans and scholarships could expand educational and training programs for counselors, especially for people of color.⁸

Job relied on his faith in God to overcome his setbacks. George Bailey relied on his faith in himself, in his family, and in his community to overcome his setbacks. What can the American public rely on to overcome the setbacks of this third year of Covid-19? Maya Angelou might adapt excerpts of her defiant poem “Still I Rise” to address the delta and omicron viruses and to champion human resilience:⁹

*Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?*

*Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I’ll rise.*

Keywords: COVID-19, delta variant, omicron variant, Georges de La Tour, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” Maya Angelou

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