

Success versus Failure

Drs Larry & Lois Dodds



One of the topics that my husband, Larry, and I talk about often with people who work abroad is this whole idea of why life is so stressful. On our website you can find a paper called: 'Stressed from Core to Cosmos.' Our website is www.heartstreamresources.org. This paper is there along with one called: 'Am I Still Me?' about identity and self-esteem as well as some other papers you might find helpful.

The first areas that we have to address when we go abroad are the external factors. That's what most of our training is for, it is learning that other language, learning the culture cues, learning how to dress differently, perhaps cook different food. Most of our training is on the external things and those are highly stressful in today's world. You may be in a situation where there is a lot of violence.

We had one young couple come to us. They lived on an island where everybody carried guns. They were the only people they knew who didn't carry a gun. There were conflicts arising constantly between different factions on that island. So they were really at high risk at any time because everyone had a weapon. They chose not to carry weapons because that did not fit their lifestyle. But in today's world of hostility, the dangers, the external dangers are very, very real-again, terrorism which has increased since 9/11, events of last year, the fact that in many countries you can't trust the authorities. One country we lived in we used to say, don't ever call the police because if you call them after you are robbed, guess what will happen. They'll take something on the way out after they've written the report. Those are realities in many cultures that the authorities who ought to help us become actual stressors to us.

Another one is catastrophic loss. We had one family with us who were evacuated four times in a row from an African country because of war. The last time some friends who were pilots flew over their house. They said: "We hate to tell you, but your roof has been stolen from your house. All of your furniture is gone and your papers are scattered throughout the yard and the neighbourhood." This is there fourth experience like that. These are very powerful external stressors so we don't underestimate those at all, but there are two areas of stress that are really hidden from us.

One is the impact that change has on us as persons. We go out into the world with the hope of changing the world. That is what we want to do, isn't it? Teach them to read. Give them good health. Bring them to a knowledge of God's love. We go out to make change happen and we are not prepared for the fact that we are going to be the first ones who have to change. We have to learn a new identity in that new culture. In my culture maybe I had a lot of status. In this new culture, I don't have much at all. In my culture, I got a lot of self-esteem from being an articulate person. But in this new culture in this new place, my goodness, I can't speak as well as my kids. One family we talked to, they were in the country two years. Their 10-year old daughter learned the local language so well that she did all the family business because the parents were still stumbling along. Now that was wonderful in one way, but what did that do to the 10-year old child. She becomes the family spokesperson, the family business person. She went to the bank. She did the adult things because she learned the language so quickly. Our self-esteem is very much affected by how we perceive ourselves in that new culture. When well-meaning friends say, "You know you don't speak very well yet. My kids speak better than you. What's wrong with you?" It has a negative effect on us.

Success versus Failure

Drs Larry & Lois Dodds



When Larry and I first went to Peru it was during a time when it was politically correct to hate Americans. So we received a lot of external, even venom, people being very angry at us externally. Then privately they said, "Could you help me get a Fulbright? Could you help me move to America?" It was kind of crazy making because the public outward thing was to be against America, and everybody's private dream was

to go to America. So those external things are real but they also have an impact on our perception. I went off to Peru thinking that I'm going because I'm really wanting to do good for the world and yet they were telling me I was there to rob and steal and to do terrible things to their culture. It was very hard to figure all that out. Our identity, our self-esteem, those things can shift. In fact over time we do become different persons. We had very dear friends, a whole group of them that would pray for us every week while we were in Peru our first few years. When we came back to the states, I said to them, "Just keep in mind that if I'm weird now, it is because you prayed for me every week to change." So we had a good laugh about it because I was weird now in some ways. I would touch them when I talked and I would do things they weren't used to. I said, "You prayed that I would change and I did change."

Now the other hidden area has to do with what I call the cosmos. What do we understand of God and the universe? Who are we in relation to that? Now again most of us grow up in a particular group of Christians. Maybe we go to certain schools. We are taught how God ought to act. Do you notice that? We are told basically what God will do and what God won't do. Again, my husband, Larry, and I have discovered that in forty countries we talked to people from any denomination, the Anglicans, the Pentecostals. No matter what they started out as, they have come to some kind of crisis of faith because God doesn't behave right. He doesn't behave the way they were taught.

One person says, "I was taught God doesn't do healing any more, but I saw it with my own eyes." A young physician from Africa, a new doctor there said, "I couldn't believe it, the nurses in this African hospital said to me as a doctor, 'Aren't you going to pray for this person?' They were the ones who thought of it, because he had just treated the person and so he said to them, "Oh, well of course I will pray." And he prayed and he was astounded because the person got well. And the child who was dying was a little while later sitting in bed. The nurses said, "Well of course, it was because you prayed." He felt humbled. God didn't act the way he thought he should, based on what he was taught. For many of us that creates a crisis of faith. Why isn't God behaving? Some people say if we really served God and we really love Him, bad things won't happen. So when the bad things happen, as Americans, our first response is: "What did I do wrong?" One of the scriptures that we've paid attention to in this respect is Jesus telling the parable of the person who owned a vineyard sending his servant to the vineyard to collect the rent. You remember that story. What happened to his servants? We say, "Were they successful?" No. They didn't collect the rent. In fact they were beaten up and sent home empty handed. They did not succeed, but they did what the master asked them to do, so they were faithful.

Sometimes, especially for Americans who have the idea that God will always reward us, we get very depressed and we have a crisis of faith when bad things happen. We have to examine that because God

Success versus Failure

Drs Larry & Lois Dodds



isn't really very predictable. Sometimes things don't go the way we expect. A child dies or as with our son David who was bitten by a rabid dog, nearly died of DDT. Those bad things have not happened because we did something wrong. They are part of this whole process of going to another place and serving God in a different way. But as we live abroad in different cultures, we do have to re-examine who we think God is. That's not always a comfortable process.

Some of us go through what we call a 'dark night of the soul.' For God's own purposes He leads us through a time where we can't see Him, but He's testing us to see really where our faith is, and where our obedience is. We may get beaten up or we may come home empty handed. But have we obeyed Him? That is the key question.

Dr. Joseph Sun is the head of the Romanian Bible Society and during the communist era he was often imprisoned, arrested and suffered greatly. When we asked him what he thought about success, he was surprised and he said to us, "Success, we don't even use that word in Romania. What we talk about is faithfulness. Have we been faithful to God's call? That is the real question, not how successful we are." But for some of us from other cultures, our crisis of faith comes about because we worry about success and whether God is behaving right. That is blessing us as He is supposed to and answering prayers in certain ways. So we need to re-examine what we think about this whole question of who God is and then how we fit into His purpose.