

The Village That Could

An inspirational tale of resilience in challenging times

Ralph McKechnie Brown



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Before we begin...

This is a story about overcoming adversity with resilience, or mental toughness.

It could just amuse you—or change your life.

You can use the 15 ideas in the story at work, looking for work, in study, sport, leadership, and in your relationships, including parenting. They work just as well for teams and families.

The story comes with apologies to Shakespeare, some of the finest orators of the past century and to The Little Red Hen. But the story is much more than it may seem.

Its 15 key ideas are based on the experiences of people who have faced hardship and thrived, and on extensive research published over the past 30 years. Those studies have revealed valuable information about what makes people resilient when the going gets tough.

We can all develop our resilience and the research shows that there are other benefits: not only more persistence, motivation and happiness, but better relationships, health and even a longer life.

Challenging times make focusing on resilience seem especially appropriate, but its flipside, depression and anxiety have been increasing through the boom years too. Depression is now 10 times more prevalent than in the 1960s. Even by the 1980s the average American child was more anxious than the average psychiatric patient of the 1950s.

For most of us, resilience is useful every day, regardless of the economic climate. Depending on our fragility, we may lose our equilibrium when a project is behind schedule, we don't achieve a target, a presentation to a group doesn't go well, or a colleague or partner criticises us, or something we've done.

As you read the story you will recognise skills you already have, but don't think of them as boxes to tick. Most of us do bounce back from adversity or feelings of hopelessness. What really matters is how quickly.

When we are not anxious or feeling down, it's easy to continue our rose-tinted assessment of ourselves. We say, 'Oh I always do that. I'm very positive. I always see my glass as half-full.' That may be true, but it's very human, and perfectly healthy, to be unrealistic about our sense of control, our success, influence, popularity and abilities. It's so human that one study suggested that 85 per cent of men believe that they have above-average social skills. More than half of drivers believe they are above average. That's not possible.

It can be more useful to try to remember those occasions when we didn't handle situations well. We can learn most from those times when adversity distressed us so much that we were dragged down by negative thoughts and felt more like a victim than a problem-solver.

See if you can make more of the ideas in the story, in a focused way, in every part of your life, despite setbacks, doubts and doubters.

At the end of the story you'll find more about the key ideas of this book and some suggestions for putting them into action.

1 The words that chilled them all

Long ago, in a land far away, below mighty snow-capped mountains, surrounded by a dark forest, lay a sombre valley where the people lived in fear.

It was the time of the wolf, a time when wolves ran free, roaming the forest and into the farmlands and even the village.

The people never ventured out at night without flaming torches, for they knew that wolves could emerge from the shadows of the moonlight at any time.

They also knew there was nothing they could do. They knew it with a certainty that no one ever questioned. Even in the warmth and security of the tavern, and with the confidence that comes with excessive refreshment, no villager ever suggested that they might fight back.

Yet, the people of the valley had hope. They hoped that one day a man (for this was long, long ago) of great power and skill, perhaps even a great orator, would lead them to victory over the wolves. Perhaps, even better, much better, their leader would be a man with special powers, who could work alone.

And it did come to pass that in that valley a young boy, Gudgeon, grew to manhood and became skilled in the art of magic.

He was so skilled and so wise that even before his beard turned white, many began to whisper that he might be the one to lead them. Finally they cried, 'Let us appoint him now, so that he might deliver us victory against our mighty foe'.

And so it was that Gudgeon was appointed as their leader.

The people rejoiced as he used his powers to cast out the wolves from the valley. The church bell began to chime once more. Villagers took their children out to see stars for the first time in their lives.

'Let us rename our village', they cried. 'Let us call it The Village of Gudgeon, so that our champion might be remembered forever'.

The people believed they were safe, for they believed in the magic of their leader, and that was all they needed. He was a great man. They were certain of it. He would never let them down.

Yet Gudgeon did not rest well, for he was greatly troubled. His magic had sent the wolves away in fear, but that fear would not last.

Farmers journeyed home to the village at dusk, not only without torches, but alone. Those who had once tended the fires at the entrance to the village now slept every night in the comfort of their feather beds.

Gudgeon would wake to the howls of wolves at the edge of the forest.

‘You must keep the fires burning,’ he told his people, ‘or the wolves will enter the village once more.’

‘Leader,’ said the blacksmith, ‘you worry too much. Did you not see the wolves scurry from the valley yelping in fear? They will not return.’

But they did.

The baker’s apprentice saw them as he glanced up from the graveyard. It was the leader of the pack and his mate, in the village square, panting menacingly in the moonlight.

The apprentice pulled his master’s daughter to her feet and together they ran to the church and slammed the heavy door.

By daybreak, the rumours had spread throughout the village. So had the doubts. Were the great magician’s powers exhausted? Did he allow wolves back in? Did he not know? Did he not care?

Then events took a very strange turn.

It happened that even the mighty leader was troubled by a weakness—a truly human weakness, known by only a few in the village.

Those few were suspicious and hurried to his house. The door was open and there in a chair by the embers of his fire was the mighty magician, conqueror of the wolf, dispenser of justice—asleep. And the bottle beside him did not look medicinal.

‘Can this be the man of honour, the man who used his powers in so noble a cause?’ they asked. ‘Is this the champion of goodness and liberty, who gave our village its very name?’

‘Surely he cannot remain as our leader.’

Within an hour the whole village knew.

‘We must call a meeting before the sun sets this day,’ called the washerwoman.

So it was that in the village square, in front of them all, he confessed, asked for their forgiveness and told them that he would leave their village that night.

In the silence, from the forest, they could just hear the howl of that most evil wolf of them all, the leader of the pack.

‘But who will lead us now?’ cried the carpenter. ‘Who will dispense wisdom and justice and remind us to light the fires?’

Silence.

Then the fortune-teller spoke. ‘If no one else will do it, I will. I know some magic and I’ve been here long enough to know about wisdom and justice.’

There was a sudden tumult of protest, for they had no faith in her magic and, because it was long, long ago, they were not equal opportunity employers.

A long silence followed and they gazed upon their feet.

‘Who will save us now?’

Another silence, followed by the howls of many wolves nearby. Some in the crowd began to leave for the safety of their cottages.

Then, a small but commanding voice, the voice of a stranger: ‘I will. I will lead you from this darkness to a place of peace and light.’

The crowd gasped and stepped back, for this was the voice of a child, but the bearing, dignity and confidence of a true leader. And, as she strode to the top of the church steps, they began to whisper.

‘She teaches the torches to burn bright.’

‘Such confidence in one so young and the quality of her garments suggest a magician’s work.’

And the doubters: ‘Can this child really save us from wolves?’

And the child tossed back her hood and spoke in a voice that echoed off the stone walls.

‘I bring not magic, but insight. And the answer to your troubles lies within your own hearts.’

Then came the words that chilled them all.

‘And I tell you that you must prepare for more adversity. Fortune will not be your companion this winter.’

‘What, Child? What will become of us?’ But many already knew what she would say next and a ghastly silence fell upon them.

‘You must prepare for famine, for frost will lay low your crops within days from now.’ An old woman fainted and the crowd called ‘No! No!’ for they had known famine and they feared for their lives and the lives of their young.

The child paused only for a moment. ‘Let us not shrink from these challenges; let us accept them in the knowledge that adversity is part of the rhythm of life. Let us work together to overcome both wolves and famine.’

‘But each must play a part. Therefore I say to you, ask not what your village can do for you; ask what you can do for your village.’

The miller broke the silence that followed. ‘If the child foretells the future, we must have a mighty champion.’



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On the afternoon of the next day, the child drew aside three men she thought might be the most courageous. 'We must destroy the evil one,' she told them, 'the leader of the pack, for without him the others will surely be vanquished.'

'But how?' they asked, 'We are but men—and a child.'

And she replied, 'We must use all our courage, resolve and guile. Who will take the first journey with me into the forest, so that we might discover the lair of the wolves and plan our attack?'

'Not I,' said the oldest man of the village, 'for I carry the burden of our knowledge and must protect it for generations to come.'

'Not I,' said the strongest man, 'for the people depend upon my strength to lift and carry.'

'Not I,' said the youngest man of the village, 'for my mother expects me home before dark and if I should be late, I would face her wrath.'

'Then I shall go alone' replied the child. And she did, the next day.

It was mid-morning, on a bend in the path deep in the forest that he appeared, slinking out of the shadows, more cunning than any serpent—the leader of the pack, oozing benevolence.

'Well, how simply delightful. A little villager comes to my pantry. And how are the people of the village? Sleeping well? We're not keeping you awake are we?'

The child was not shaken, nor stirred, nor deceived. 'Be warned evil one, that the day of your doom approaches, you and all your kind.'

And the wolf feigned shock and replied, 'Are we not fellow-creatures of the valley? Do we not have eyes? Do we not have feet?' He leaned forward and she could smell his breath. 'And if you wrong us, shall we not seek revenge?'

Within an instant he was gone, into the shadows of the forest.

So the child continued on her way. She looked in caves, in hollows in the ground, anywhere wolves might be expected to live. She found nothing and moved on towards the summit.

Within an hour she was on the rock at the head of the valley. Below her lay the village, the forest, and the deserted fields and gardens.

Gudgeon appeared in a flash of lightning.

The child did not look around.

‘No progress so far’ she said, as he sat beside her. ‘I told them all that the answer lay in their own hearts, but it made no difference. Not one agreed to come with me.’

In the silence between them she heard the blacksmith clanging metal far below. Then Gudgeon spoke.

‘They have learned helplessness. For many years they have relied on others, or luck, or fate. I let them. They had known nothing else and I bathed in their respect, their trust and faith in me. It was a trap, for them and for me, and it is for you too.’

She looked up. ‘What should I do now?’

‘I think they already knew that the answer lies within them. Perhaps soon they will have the courage to act on that truth, but it will be the biggest change of their lives.’

They talked until mid-afternoon and the child returned to the forest path.

Suddenly, out of the shadows, the leader of the pack appeared before her once more. Again, he did not bring his mate.

‘Human child,’ he said, ‘you have ambitions to lead, but wolves rule this valley and always will. It’s not justice; it’s not fair; it’s just the way it is.’

And the child stopped on the path, turned to him and drew herself up to her full height saying: ‘It is not the way it will be. Tell your pack that we shall endure any hardship, bear any burden, face any danger, enlist any friend, oppose any wolf, to assure our survival and liberty.’

And the leader of the pack replied, ‘Yeah. Whatever’. And he was gone once more.

She returned to the village without seeing or hearing any other wolves, even at dusk. She thought that odd. Was it a sign?

2 Seven go into the forest

The child awoke to find her prediction fulfilled.

The ground was pure white, glistening in the rising sun. She ran to the gardens and fields. They too were white. It was a frost so early that it would surely destroy the crops.

She called a meeting.

The crowd was as quiet as the frozen fields.

‘The time has come,’ she told them, ‘to make choices’.

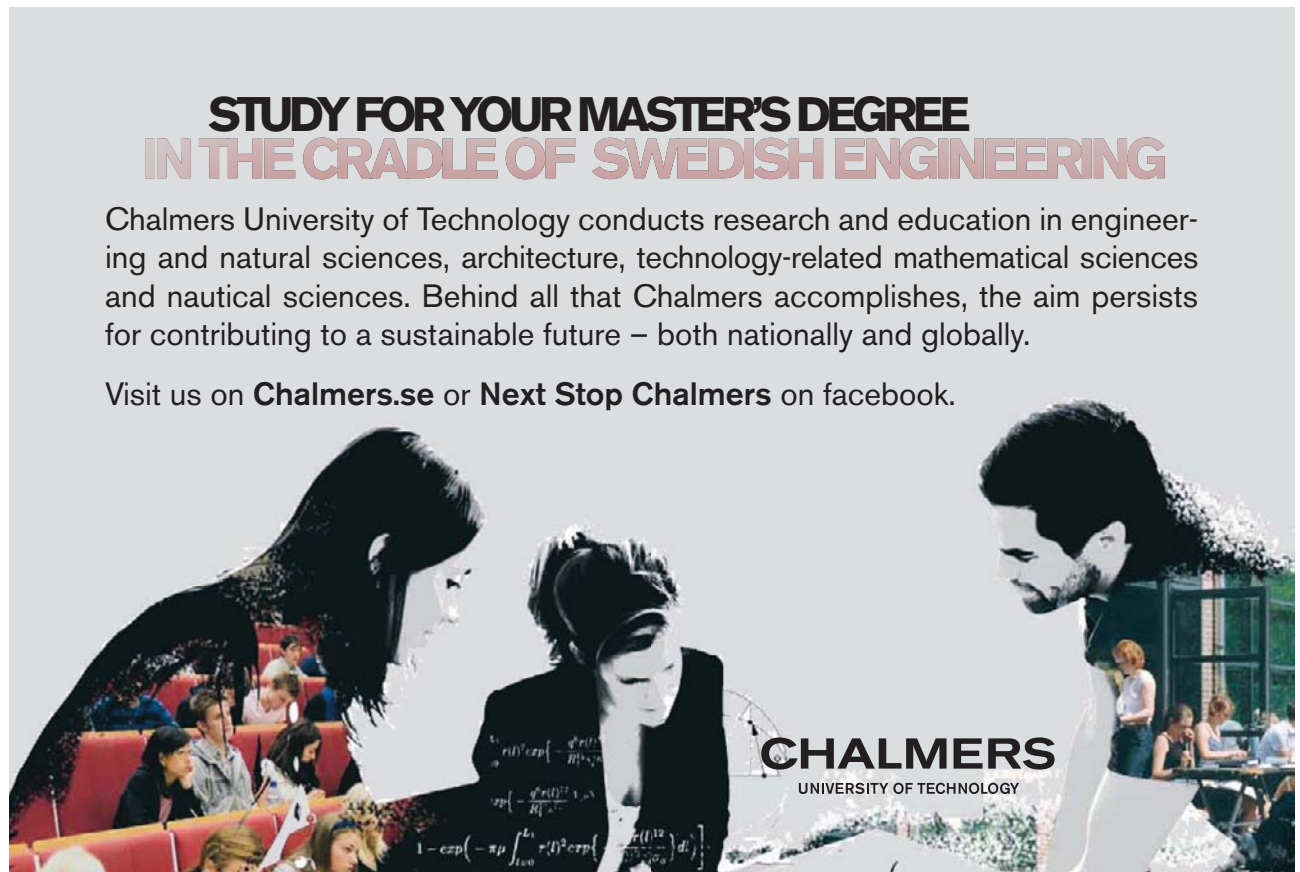
They stared, dazed.

‘We can choose to give in to hunger and to wolves. We can starve, let the wolves overrun this village, and say we could do nothing about it. That would be a choice.

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‘Or we can choose to take charge of our lives. Once we have truly made that momentous choice, we can make other choices to liberate us from adversity.

‘We can choose to be courageous. We can choose to take action before wolves and famine overwhelm us.

‘First, we must choose to believe that it is possible to succeed, on our own, accepting that success is not our right, and will not be easy.’

‘What is your plan?’ a villager called.

‘I have no plan,’ she replied. ‘It must be your plan.’

Many in the crowd murmured disapproval.

‘I have already been into the forest and survived. I ask you now to choose courage; to face the same fear for the good of your village.’

Seven men remained after the others had dispersed. She recognised the tinker, the tailor, the butcher, the baker, the miller, the beggar and the blacksmith.

So it was that the next day they were on their way into the forest to face their first challenge together.

The child led the way with the men walking unusually close together, their pointed sticks poised for action.

They dug a deep trap in the forest path. When they returned the next day, not a single wolf had passed by.

‘We have failed,’ whispered the tailor, falling to his knees. ‘Our village depended on us and we failed.’

‘It is not a failure’ replied the child. ‘That would suggest it is forever.’

‘What is it then?’

‘It is a setback. We will find another way.’

They made nets to drop from the trees. Again, they caught not a single wolf.

‘Another setback?’ asked the baker.

‘Yes, just another setback.’

They tried nooses. Again, not one wolf.

‘A setback?’

‘Yes, just a setback.’

‘Not a failure?’ smirked the beggar.

‘No,’ replied the child. ‘And we must ask ourselves what we have learned from our setbacks so far.’

‘Let me think,’ replied the miller. ‘A trap in the ground does not catch wolves, nor do nets in trees, nor nooses on forest trails. That, I think is the sum of our learning.’

‘No, we have learned much more than that.’

‘We are villagers and will never be hunters?’ offered the baker.

‘I have learned that they are laughing at us in the village,’ added the tinker.

‘But we have chosen to believe that we can succeed,’ replied the child.

They sat on the ground, then realised that they could not escape her eyes.

‘We expected obstacles,’ she said. ‘Now we have found them, but we must continue to believe in ourselves and our eventual success. That is a choice we must make, for only luck would otherwise bring us victory.’

‘Good fortune did bring us the great magician Gudgeon,’ replied the blacksmith.

‘Yet we have suffered an untimely frost that threatens us with famine this winter. Who of you would now put his faith in luck?’

‘What then Child have we learned that might save us from wolves and famine?’ asked the tinker. ‘For if there is a useful lesson in this sorry expedition, I have not seen it.’

‘We have learned that we can choose courage despite our fear. Who among us did not feel fear as we entered the forest for the first time?’ They were silent. ‘How much fear do you feel now?’

‘And something else. Have you seen any wolves since we came into the forest? Has anyone heard a wolf near us since the first day?’

‘No.’

‘Perhaps they have gone,’ whispered the baker.

‘Then have we driven them away?’ asked the child. ‘Do they now fear us more than we fear them?’

They were sure that was impossible.

‘They are vicious. Do you not know the story of this valley—of the children carried away, of farmers attacked when they dared to step into the night without their torches?’

‘I must ask you this,’ she said, ‘and you must search your minds carefully before you answer me. Have you or anyone in your family been attacked or carried away by wolves?’

‘No.’

‘No.’

‘Well no, but...’

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‘Any friends you can name?’

A long pause. ‘No,’ said the baker, ‘But we all know it has happened.’

‘The stone mason was attacked just last year,’ added the tailor.

‘No, he was not,’ replied the miller. ‘He was filled with many ales and cut his leg when he fell. I was there.’

‘Can any of you name any family whose infant was carried away in the jaws of a wolf?’

‘What about the leader of the pack Child? He is monstrous.’

Then the baker: ‘It was my own apprentice who faced him alone in the village square. He saw the huge fangs.’

‘Did the wolf use them?’

‘My apprentice gave him no opportunity.’

‘The leader looks impressive and he talks big, but I suspect...’

‘He talks?’ It was a chorus.

‘Well he talks to me. He is a bully, but reflect upon what has happened since we came into the forest. He is not here, nor is his pack. All we hear now are distant sounds of wolves. We have found no lairs here. I found none when I entered the forest before the big frost.’

‘Let us return to the village,’ she said, ‘knowing that the forest is ours if we claim it, knowing that we have taken charge of our lives, that our courage has triumphed over our fear, knowing that we have saved your families—not from wolves, but from fear of them.’

‘But the frost has brought us famine. We will have almost no food this winter,’ said the miller. ‘That is our fate.’

‘For now, rejoice in our success, for it shows that we are people who can triumph over adversity, not simply be passive victims of circumstance. It is a sign that even surviving famine is within our grasp.’

3 Celebrations

The news spread through the village by nightfall. The Seven, as they quickly became known, had driven the wolves from the forest.

In the tavern, the baker recounted to a hushed crowd that the forest had been thick with wolves when they entered its dark and eerie canopy on the first day.

The blacksmith raised his deep voice: 'If we now use the forest as our own, the wolves will dare not approach us.' The villagers cried 'Yes!' and several slapped him on his back.

The baker stood to regain his audience. 'It is indeed a great victory, for it shows that we can take charge of our lives, that we can choose courage over fear, that we can choose to take action, not simply be passive victims of circumstance.'

They coaxed him for details and as the night wore on, he spoke (reluctantly of course) of the struggle against their mighty enemy. He gave credit to the courage and determination of his friends, never suggesting that he had led them to victory. But the crowd knew that was only modesty. The blacksmith glowed with pride. The miller stared into his ale. The crowd cheered and bought them more than they should drink.

'And the child?' enquired the shepherd. 'What of her?'

'She was there too.'

And many touched tankards in quiet respect.

The villagers stumbled home, their boots scraping on the stony paths. Some stopped to savour the still air, the stars and the silence from the forest.

They had triumphed over the wolf, but could they find a way to survive famine?

4 Tensions in the village

The meeting the next morning began late, but most of the villagers were there.

As the child appeared at the top of the steps, the crowd was quiet.

‘We have triumphed over the wolf. Let us now look for our choices as we rally against famine.’

The shoemaker called from the crowd. ‘We must leave the valley and find shelter and food elsewhere before it is too late.’

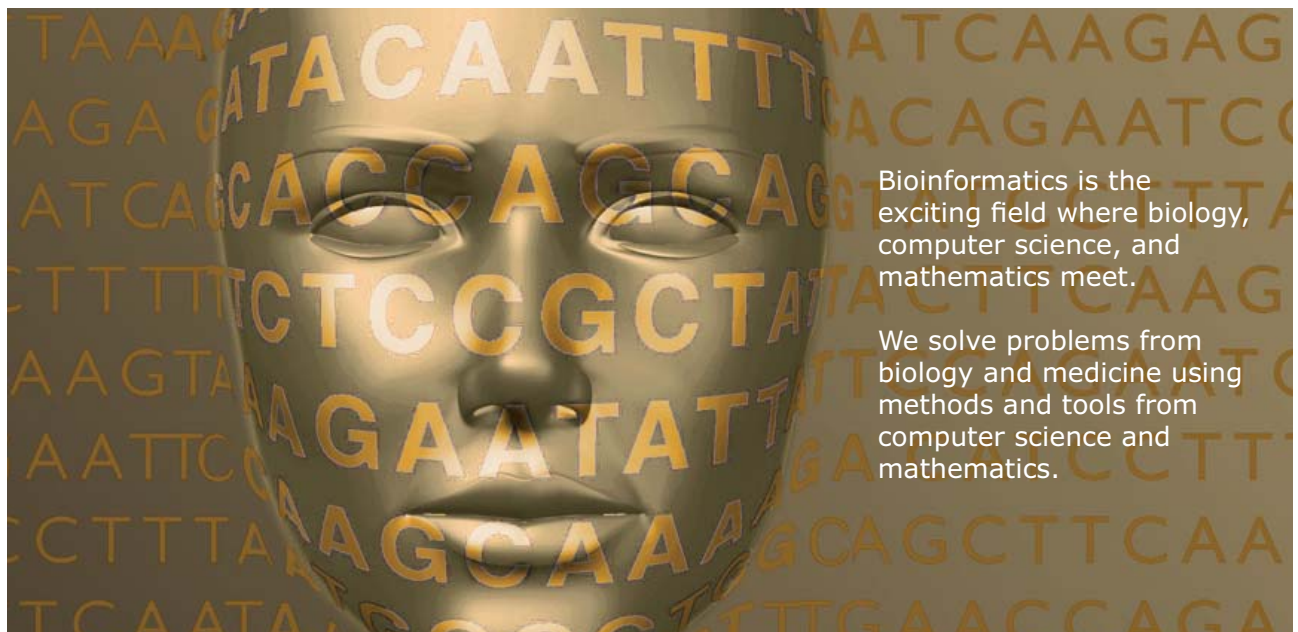
Many nodded and they waited for the child’s reply.

‘Even if we must leave, let us leave with a plan to make the best of our plight, together.’

‘We must move quickly,’ replied the shoemaker. ‘This will be the second famine in less than a generation. The village is cursed by the whims of Nature. Let us accept that and abandon it now.’



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The child thought for a moment. 'It may be that we cannot summon from all our minds a better choice than to abandon our village. But I say this with all my heart: let us not choose hopelessness. It may yet be possible to share a future together in this beautiful place. Let us consider all our choices.'

The blacksmith rose and, because he was one of The Seven, the crowd hushed. 'I believe that our goblet is always half-full. I believe that everything will work out and that many in this village worry too much. Do not consider plans that would distract us from the work we must do each day. Have faith that fortune will smile upon us once again.' Some applauded.

The baker stood immediately. 'You may think that you have heard the words of an optimist. But our friend's optimism is not of a useful kind.'

'Our goblet is not half-full; it is almost empty. Thus far, fortune has not been kind to us. Wolves have oppressed us for many years, yet even before we rid ourselves of them, a new and more deadly menace came upon us. We cannot wait for that menace to go away, for it will not, without our action. Let us face that reality, not deny it with empty hope and do nothing.' The child nodded.

The shoemaker called back, 'We cannot all survive famine—that much we know and those who told us that we could fight it the last time it came to this village are silent today.'

'He speaks the truth!' called the fortune-teller.

The shoemaker continued: 'If we stay many will die of fever and hunger, first the weak, then the young. Let us decide now how we will distribute the food we have, and begin our journeys to a better life.'

'You go too far!' protested the miller. 'You speak of fever and death from famine as if they were as certain as the seasons themselves. They are not.'

'I tell you that the frost has cut even deeper this time,' replied the shoemaker.

'You would have us abandon all hope.'

'I simply offer what I know to be true.'

The baker stood beside the child to speak. 'It is different this time, for what remains in our goblet is precious indeed. Together we developed a plan and triumphed over the wolf. If we needed proof of our resilience, that is it. We have fought adversity once and we can do it again.'

But his words left them frustrated.

‘How?’ called the fortune-teller. ‘How do we defeat famine when frost has already destroyed our crops?’

They began to talk amongst themselves.

‘Plant new crops. It may not be too late,’ suggested the apothecary.

‘It is too late,’ replied a farmer, stroking his beard. ‘And the orchards will not flower again.’

‘Graze more sheep.’

‘Where would we get more sheep?’

‘It is hopeless,’ protested the shoemaker, and he walked away. Those who remained talked until the sun began to set.

‘Let us gather fern roots from the forest,’ called the oldest man of the village, ‘as the people did before wolves ruled us. The roots are bitter and would cause our bellies much discomfort, but they are food.’

Some whispered thanks.

‘Would there be enough fern roots to feed a whole village if we were in great need?’ asked the strongest man of the village.

‘No. And I remember that they were hard to find.’

‘Then we have one idea,’ said the child. ‘Let us now go to our beds and hope for more when the roosters wake us.’

5 The four secrets of happiness

They gathered in the tavern on the afternoon of the next day, but the villagers had no new ideas to help them survive the winter. It was a short meeting.


The next day only The Seven and five others arrived and they moved to the steps of the village square in the hope that passers-by would join them.

The child sensed misery. 'In such times,' she said, 'we must remind ourselves that we can choose hope and happiness whenever we want.'

They looked puzzled and the washerwoman replied quietly, 'Let us wait till the famine has passed. We can be happy then.'

'Why wait?' asked the child with a smile, and for the first time she did seem to them very like a child. 'Happiness will support us as we work together.'

'There are four secrets to happiness and the first, the most important of them all, is to choose to be happy—now.'




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‘Let us be realistic.’ It was the miller. ‘We are facing a famine. Does anyone have any more ideas to find food?’

They could hear the thump of the shoemaker working at his last and the child was pleased that he had not taken his own advice to leave the village.

‘Perhaps the child makes a good point,’ said the blacksmith. ‘We have no ideas now, but while we are waiting for them to come, let us choose to be happy. Happiness will give us strength to carry on, to work together and to give our friends hope where they now feel bereft of it.’

Even the washerwoman did not interrupt, so he continued.

‘Who of you would choose to do my work at the forge? It is the same work every day, yet it brings me happiness. As I stoke the furnace and hammer against the anvil, my thoughts are of gratitude. I feel grateful for my family and friends, for the warmth of the fire in winter and the good fortune to live in this village and provide its people with a service they value.’

The baker’s apprentice spoke for the first time. ‘I believe the secret to happiness is to savour life’s joys.’ The others looked amused. ‘I mean joys of all kinds. It might be the glow of the sun on your face, the taste of your broth, the colour of the leaves in spring, the warmth of the grass in summer.’

There seemed no other point to the meeting, so the beggar said, ‘Child, you spoke of four secrets of happiness and told us of only one—to choose to be happy now. Tell us the others.’

‘Our friend the blacksmith has given us the second: to be grateful, to make gratitude our way of life.’

‘Our friend the baker’s apprentice has told us the third: to savour life’s joys.’

‘And number four?’

‘To build our relationships. Are we not doing that already by being here, working together, drawing on each other for support? Those who have passed us by as we met today are not happier for it. They worry alone. Let us offer them hope through our choice to be happy.’

‘Does anyone have a new idea that might draw our day to a close?’

The carpenter spoke. ‘There will be ripe berries at the edge of the forest, and no wolves. I have heard that berries will last the winter if kept in earthen jars. If it is true, it would help a little.’

‘We must thank our friend,’ said the child, ‘but while we look for food to sustain us, perhaps we ignore something else.’

‘Child, you speak in a riddle,’ replied the miller. ‘We can only eat food. What else could there be?’

‘Perhaps there is something we could trade with other villages, now that the forest paths are ours to use.’

‘We have nothing to trade. ‘They may have nothing to trade.’

‘Then we must discover what is true,’ replied the child. ‘Tomorrow, let us search our village for anything of value that we might sell for food. Let our tinker and our miller journey to villages within two days from here to discover whether the people have food to sell.

‘We must also go to the fields, orchards and gardens. Let us examine every plant and every tree to discover whether it will provide us with some sustenance this winter.’

The villagers agreed, for it seemed better to do anything than simply await their fate. Yet they also feared knowing the truth. Would it bring them new hope, or a reality more cruel than they could bear?



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6 The villagers discover the truth

In the orchard the next morning those who had examined the crops appointed the baker to speak for them. The crowd was attentive.

‘We have found some things to encourage us all,’ he began. ‘The frost has denied us our fruit and our entire wheat crop lies dead upon the ground, but it has spared one part in ten of our barley. Our walnuts are, as you see, untouched.’ They looked up to see the shells suspended in the green husks, ready to fall. ‘We think we will have three sacks of the nuts. The cabbages and leeks remain intact.’

‘There must be more, surely?’ protested the blacksmith.

‘No. That is all. The other vegetables are now rotting in the sun.’

‘Let us hear from those who sought things that we might sell,’ asked the child.

‘We found little that we could spare, unless death were at our doorstep,’ said the apothecary. ‘But we could offer the door from the house of our late friend the cooper. His bed and table might have some value, but it would be modest indeed. There is an old plough that lies rusting in the grass. Our friend the blacksmith could make it fit for sale.’

‘What say our tinker and miller?’

‘The news is both good and bad,’ replied the miller. ‘The other villages did not lose their crops to frost and the people expect to have food they might sell to us. But they cannot give us shelter should we choose to leave our own village.’

‘Let us then record what we have,’ said the child, and the oldest man began to write.

FOOD

Barley 1 acre

Cabbages 56

Leeks 75

3 sacks of walnuts (To be confirmed)

5 pigs

3 cows

24 sheep

12 laying hens

Berries from forest (Amount unknown)

Roots from forest (Amount unknown)

TO SELL

1 cottage door

1 table

1 bed

1 plough

The baker held the list and read it aloud.

It was the washerwoman who spoke for most. 'It is not enough to feed us for six months. Many will be weak by the time the fever arrives.'

The child turned and gestured for them to stand back as she addressed them in her leader's voice.

'Let us not dwell on that we cannot change. We cannot undo the frost, nor restore our withered wheat and barley. Let us be content that we now know the height of the mountain.'

'It will be an arduous journey, but we have begun. Until we sought to discover the truth, we did not know that we would have some barley, vegetables or nuts, and some objects that we could sell. We did not know that we would have berries to gather from the forest and even the fern roots, should we need to call upon them.'

'Let us think again of those who are not with us this morning because they have lost hope. Let them know of our progress. Let them all be a part of the journey, sharing in its successes and setbacks.'

'But we need food!' called the washerwoman. 'We cannot all live on fancy words and what we have on our list.'

'Then we must find a way,' replied the child.

As she sat beside the fire that night, deep in thought, Gudgeon appeared once more.

'We need your help,' she said. 'We need your magic or people will die.'

'My magic cannot help you,' he said, looking into the flames. 'I can still do lightning and sparks and disappear when I need to, but that is all. I cannot summon food, or water, or gold. I cannot mend teeth, or shoes or...'

'I understand you.'

'But let us look back on your success so far,' he said, slumping into the hard wooden chair on the other side of the fire.

'Success? Most of the people have lost hope.'

'Will more survive now that you know about the barley, nuts, berries, roots, and the objects you might sell?'

'Yes, but is it too much to ask that we might all survive?'

'No. And perhaps that is possible, but let us speak of those who still attend the meetings. Where once they thought their survival depended, not on their own efforts, but on luck or fate or a magician, they now act on what you told them: that it is up to them.

'They have seen setbacks where others have seen failure. They have dismissed the blacksmith's empty optimism and chosen to act instead.

'You now know the challenge ahead. You have a plan, and it marks your progress.'

'Thank you,' said the child. 'But we need an idea, an idea to save us all.'



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7 A surprising idea emerges

Three days later scores of villagers filled the tavern, for they had heard rumours that the child would have an announcement. She climbed on to a table to speak and had their silence in a second.

‘We have heard no new ideas that might assure us of our safety this winter,’ she began. ‘Let us now consider again what else we have that we might sell.’

A few near the door and beyond her gaze disappeared to resume their household chores.

‘What do we value, that others might too?’ prompted the child.

The tinker did not hesitate. ‘As the one who has travelled far beyond this village, I can compare. For me it is the beauty of the valley I value most. It is the deep green of the forest, the clear waters of the river and the fertile fields that surround us.’

Even being one of The Seven did not save him from their laughter.

The shoemaker was the first to speak. ‘Do you wish that we should uproot our forest and capture our stream to be sold to others? How would they carry them away?’

‘The child asked for what we value,’ protested the tinker.

‘That I did. And thank you.’

The crowd was suddenly in good humour.

‘I value a lamb pie.’

‘For me it is an ale after a day in the fields.’

‘For me it’s a warm bath on a cold night.’

‘Sunday mornings and good company.’

‘Just a moment!’ It was the miller. ‘I have an idea.’ The laughter settled slowly. ‘We have heard that our friend the tailor likes a warm bath. Does anyone else?’ He paused, but it was not a question they needed to answer.

‘Then what is your idea?’ The washerwoman was impatient. ‘That we bathe in the icy river and gaze upon the forest to forget the hunger and the fever? Do you not remember the last famine?’

‘No. It is that we heat the water and invite our neighbouring villagers to enjoy it—in return for food.’

‘Ridiculous! We cannot heat a river.’

‘Next idea please!’ called the shoemaker.

‘Wait,’ called the child. ‘The idea may not be perfect, but it is newly-hatched. Let us not abandon it without thought, for it is the only idea we have. Even if it does not survive our scrutiny, it may spark another.’

They argued, protested, suggested, pondered, improved and contemplated until the noon.

The next day they began work.

Every able man, woman and child helped dig the pit for a bathing pond, above the river, and the breadth and width of a cottage floor.

The village had rarely seen such cooperation and harmony. The stone mason lined the bathing pond with boulders from the river. Beside it, the blacksmith built a furnace twice the size of the one he used every day. The labourers and the shepherd cut dead wood from the forest as fuel. Others helped carry barrels of water to the pond. They moved small shrubs to make it look as if it had been nestled there for a year.

One by one, they began to feel sure that their bathing pond would bring them the food they needed, not only for the coming famine, but for all others.

The blacksmith lit the fire and by the end of the day the water was warm. Some slipped into it. After all, they said, had the child not made it their duty to savour life’s joys?

The crowd called upon their leader to open the pond officially, before they welcomed their first visitors.

She stood at the edge in the rain and addressed them across it.

‘We meet today with freedom from famine within our reach.’ A few clapped wet hands.

‘Let us look back at all that we have achieved, for it reveals what kind of people we are and what lies ahead for us.’

‘We chose to take charge of our lives.

‘We drove the wolves from the forest.

‘We chose to believe that we could succeed when famine threatened us.

‘We chose happiness and courage over hopelessness.

‘We sought to know the truth of our plight.

‘We developed the plan to build this bathing pond.

‘We worked together to make it happen.

‘Let us be proud of the idea and grateful for living in this valley, for the water and the wood and for the support of our friends at this challenging time.

‘Let us rejoice in the knowledge that generations from now, people will still say this was truly the work of the village that could.’

Joyous cheers drowned the sound of the river.

‘Yet there is more for us to do before we can be assured that all will survive the winter.’

Many looked surprised, for had they not more food than they had expected, some objects to sell and a fine warm bathing pond?

‘We must tell the people of the other villages what we offer,’ said the child, ‘for a pond is just a pond, no matter how warm our friend the blacksmith may make it.’

8 Two learn the art of persuasion

The miller and the tinker departed the next day carrying notices to display on trees, posts and walls.

They decided that they should begin at the farthest village and work back towards Gudgeon.

In a village almost two days from their own, the tinker nailed the first notice to a large tree.

Before long a small crowd had gathered and a young man read the notice to them.

NOTICE
Warm bathing pond
Village of Gudgeon
Now open
Price half bushel wheat per person

They walked away, resuming their conversations.

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More of the villagers arrived and this time the miller read it to them with enthusiasm. The villagers laughed and a woman called out, 'What good is that? Why would we walk for two days and pay half a bushel of wheat to sit in warm water when we have a barrel we can fill at home?'

'...should we ever have the urge to bathe,' added her friend.

'But this pond is set in a garden overlooking a forest,' replied the miller. 'It will be an experience you will remember for a lifetime.'

'That won't be long if we are attacked by wolves on the way home,' called another woman. The laughter disappeared amongst the chatter as the second crowd dispersed.

The miller and the tinker found a table outside the tavern. They sat in silence until the miller said, 'It is only a setback.'

'It is a big one.'

'Yes, it is a big one. But we have overcome setbacks before and we can do it again. There must be something we can learn from our first venture in persuasion.' He was working hard to sound cheerful.

'We have learned three things,' replied the tinker. 'We have learned that we may be too far from Gudgeon for our offer to seem tempting; that the people here believe that wolves control the forest; and that they prefer a bath in a barrel under their own stars to the unknown charms of our pond.'

'Then let us try a new notice in a village closer to our own,' said the miller. Let us tell all who do not know it that Man is now master of the forest.'

The next day the wind was cold on their backs and with falling leaves came memories of the last famine, but they did not speak of it.

They stopped at a village a day from Gudgeon, fixed the new notice to a pillar in the tavern and sat back to watch and listen.

NOTICE

Warm bathing pond

Village of Gudgeon

Set in valley overlooking forest

(Forest guaranteed wolf-free)

Price half bushel wheat per person

An old man read it first, then sat with his ale, his face no easier to read than a cat's. Two friends arrived. He pointed to the notice and they talked together of warm baths, meals, beds and other delights they had known. None suggested they might go to Gudgeon. But they did not laugh.

All that evening, the miller and the tinker observed as villagers peered at the notice, read it aloud, prodded it, returned to it and talked of it around them.

The closest any of them came to taking up the offer was a young man who suggested to his friends that they might journey together to Gudgeon to see if water in a pond could really be warm. The friends suggested he go alone and found a topic more entertaining.

'Just a setback?' whispered the tinker as they left the tavern for their lodgings late that night.

'Just a setback,' replied the miller, 'and we have learned much from it.'

They were awake at dawn and sat over a table, not willing to eat until they had formed a new plan.

The miller did not wait for the tinker to speak. 'We learned that this distance from Gudgeon, the people have more interest in our pond. Knowing that wolves no longer control the forest encouraged them, so did the setting of our pond. But not enough.'

Then the tinker said something profound: 'We must now add some sizzle to the sausage.'

'But how?'

'I have heard it said that in villages far away, beyond even my own travels, that one journeys to bathe, not to a warm pond, but a healing spa. One takes the waters for one's health.'

'Could our waters be healing? You are the travelled one. I know nothing of these things.'

'Let us look at the facts,' replied the tinker. 'Is our village not named after a mighty magician whose spells sent wolves yelping into the forest in fear? Is not our leader a child with the power to speak with wolves? Did the child not foretell the frost?'

'Those things are true, but how can they help us?'

'In a village such as ours would you not expect magical, healing waters?'

'But do we know? Can we say that and yet sleep at night?'

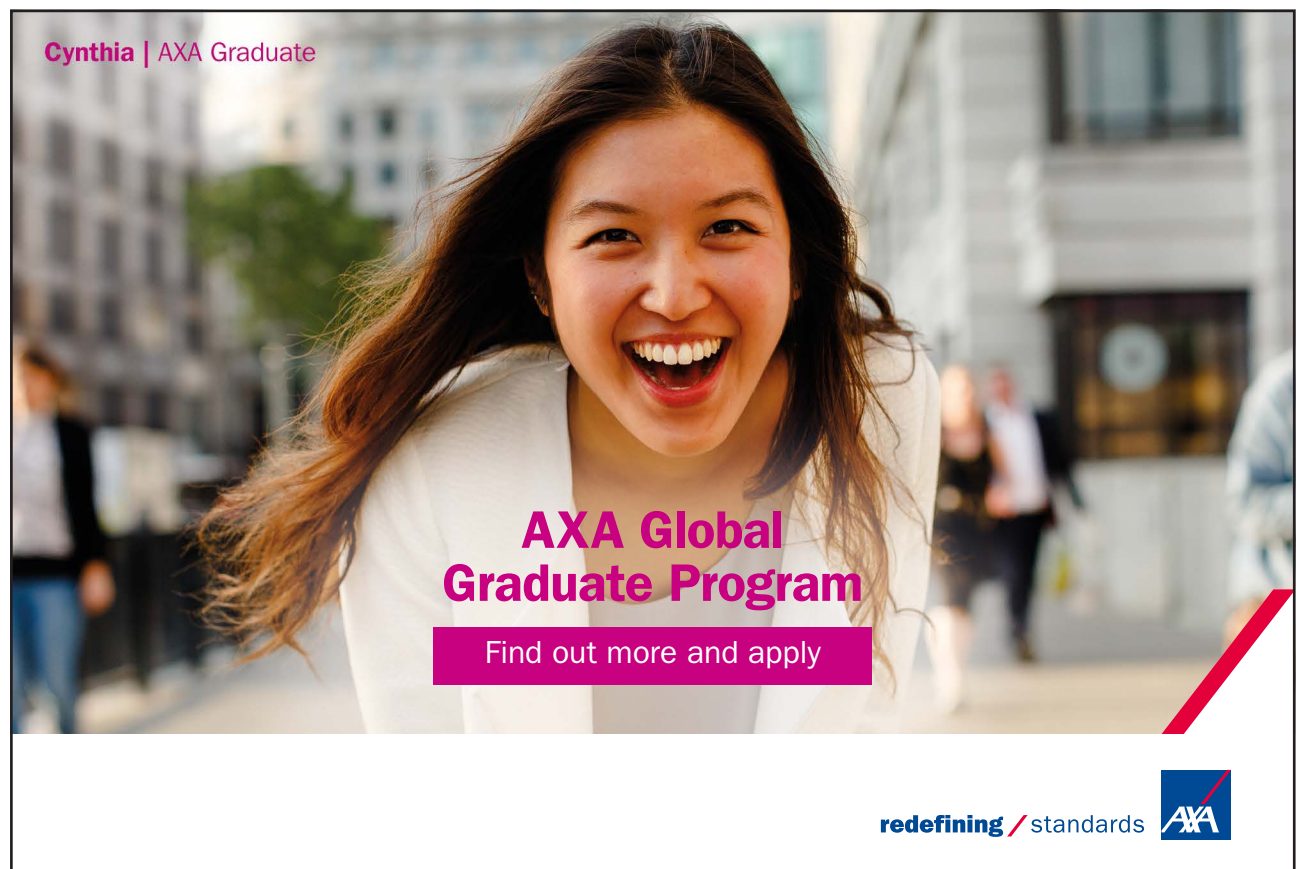
‘Perhaps we do not need to say it.’

After a cheerful breakfast, they sat to make a new notice—just one, for experience had told them that they might have more learning to do.

RELAX AND ENJOY
Spa set in enchanted valley
Magical Village of Gudgeon
Spa overlooks beautiful forest
(Forest guaranteed wolf-free)
Perfect for sick and infirm
Price half bushel wheat per person

The miller seemed pleased with their work and the tinker added, ‘We must move quickly for the winter is almost upon us. Let us fix our notice in the town square.’

Once again, the miller stood beside the notice, reading it to those who could not.



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But this time the tinker joined the crowd. ‘Have you seen this?’ he would say, drawing them closer. To others he would whisper, ‘A spa for the sick and infirm, ’tis a wonderful thing—and less than a day from here’. And: ‘Ah, the magical village of Gudgeon; now that the wolves have gone, all should see it, at least once.’

Some jostled for the best view of the notice and the tinker found a new audience. ‘They say that the good magician Gudgeon drove the wolves from the village with a single bolt of lightning.’ He could hear his words repeated throughout the crowd.

The miller caught the mood. ‘The child who now leads the village has special powers too. It was she who inspired the creation of the spa.’

Soon the word was spreading throughout the village. People came out from their houses especially to join the throng.

‘But it is too far!’ one man protested to the crowd. ‘If we journey all day we will be weary and when we have taken the waters, it will be dark and we will be in no mood to begin the journey home.’

‘The village has a cottage for guests,’ called the tinker from behind him. ‘They say you can stay the night and enjoy the magical warmth of the spa under the stars.’

The man and those around him seemed reassured, but when the crowd had dispersed, the miller was displeased.

‘We have no cottage for guests.’

‘We will,’ said the tinker, ‘the cottage of our late friend the cooper.’

‘But only the rats would live there.’

‘Not once our villagers have done their work.’

So they agreed that the tinker would return to Gudgeon the next day and arrange for the cooper’s cottage to be refurbished with all that paying guests could expect.

They prepared two copies of their next notice, adding new words.

RELAX AND ENJOY

Spa set in enchanted valley

Magical Village of Gudgeon

Spa overlooks beautiful forest

(Forest guaranteed wolf-free)

Perfect for sick and infirm

Price half bushel wheat per person

Comfortable cottage available

Price for accommodation: 1 bushel of wheat or barley.

The miller would display notices in every village he could visit in the following two weeks. The tinker would join him again as soon as possible.

The tinker left for Gudgeon and the miller continued his journey, determined that neither the tinker nor the people he met would know of the questions that troubled him. Would there be time to make the spa a success before winter, famine and fever set in? How many in his own village would die before the relief of spring?



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9 A new era begins

For the first time since his youth, the tinker was excited—something he considered unbecoming for someone of his experience of the world. He ignored the questions of the villagers who welcomed him at the entrance and met with the baker and the child by her fireside.

‘I bring good news,’ he began, ‘for villagers a day from here are talking of visiting us.’ The child read his notice aloud by the light of the flames.

The baker did not look excited. ‘I believe that you have promised more than we can deliver,’ he cautioned. ‘And why a spa? Is it not a pond?’

‘Friends, we have learned new ways. Each time we had a setback, we looked at what it could teach us. A pond does not excite interest. A spa does.’

‘What is this Magical Village of Gudgeon?’ asked the baker. ‘I know of no such village.’

‘In the business of persuasion it is known as *poetic licence*. The village is magical in the sense that it has an atmosphere so special it is like being transported to a magical place.’ He was now wary and dared not mention the magician, let alone the child’s power to talk with wolves and foretell frosts.

The baker took hold of the notice. ‘But we are suggesting that our pond, our spa, cures sickness and infirmity.’

‘We are not. We are suggesting that it is perfect for the sick and infirm—simply to rest their bodies in peace and warmth. If they believe there is more to the waters, that belief will help them recover, but we have promised no cures.’

‘You say we have a cottage available,’ said the child. ‘I did not know that.’

The tinker explained his plan for the cooper’s cottage. He stressed the urgency. They listened attentively. The child looked up from her chair. ‘You have done well.’

The meeting in the square the next morning brought out all the villagers. They hushed the moment the child appeared at the top of the steps.

She spoke of the progress, of poetic licence, of persuasion, of spas and ‘taking the waters’.

She spoke of a magical village in an enchanted valley; then told them it was theirs.

She announced that the tinker was on his way to rejoin the miller and work the crowds in other villages. She told them of the plan for the cooper's cottage and the challenges ahead in the new business of hospitality.

'Let us begin anew with hope in our hearts,' she continued, all their eyes on her. 'With that hope, we can plan together, work together, learn from our setbacks together, knowing that we are close to the mountain top, knowing that we can almost see the promised land of plenty, of safety and freedom.'

'Now let us go forth to save the village we love.'

The men repaired the small hole in the thatched roof of the cooper's old cottage. The women swept the floors, removed the spiders, drove out the rats, replaced the chairs, cleaned the tiny windows, mended the linen, beat the rug, stacked the wood and removed the hedgehog. They replaced the candles, filled the pitchers with water, swept the path and whitewashed the walls. Two days later, it was the finest cottage in the village. It was ready for paying guests.

Yet, to their growing alarm, it remained empty. The miller and the tinker returned, buoyed by the interest, especially from those villages nearby, but when the child asked how many people they knew were definitely coming, they could not name one.

The first snow arrived. It was light, but the message was clear.

The villagers began to ration their supplies. They talked of fern roots and whether it might be better to eat some first to save their real food.

Each time they ventured out into the cold air they tried not to look at the cooper's cottage. They spoke less and less of the spa and the business of hospitality. Some began to think it best forgotten.

Then, one evening at the edge of the village, the shepherd looked up to see a horse and cart approaching on the forest path. His heart raced for he did not know of any villager who might be returning so close to dusk. A young man held the reins, while an old man lay on straw behind him.

'I bring my grandfather to take the healing waters of Gudgeon,' called the young man. 'I pray that you have room in your guests' cottage.'

'I believe we may have,' the shepherd replied. 'I will take you to my own cottage while we prepare it for you.'

The news spread through the village like a gust of warm wind. 'Guests! Guests! Our first guests!'

The washerwoman was the first to the cooper's cottage. She lit the fire and was lighting the candles as the crowd arrived. The fortune-teller prepared a hearty broth for the old man and his son. The blacksmith lit the fire for the spa. A dozen men appeared to help. They worked all night, cutting, chopping, stacking wood and stoking the furnace.

By the morning, it was all that they had hoped. The spa was steaming in the crisp air. The old man was well rested and the whole village turned out to see him slide slowly into the water. He looked around grinning widely as they clapped and cheered.

And that was the new beginning for the people of Gudgeon. So pleased were the old man and his son with both the waters and the hospitality, that word of their visit spread quickly on their return home.

More guests came, bringing with them their payments of wheat and barley. Even from the far-away village, where they had once laughed at the idea, people came to take the waters of the magical village overlooking the enchanted valley.

So does our story end with peace, tranquility and happiness in the village of Gudgeon? Certainly not. That is an ending for children's stories.

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It is true that the villagers used the four secrets of happiness. They chose to be happy. They chose to be grateful, to savour life's joys and to build their relationships. That happiness made their guests feel welcome and raised their own spirits. It made them more resilient. Giving hospitality to others gave them a calling, and that made them happier too.

It is also true that their hospitality business was so successful that they had to build more cottages, and even another spa.

It is true that they no longer depended on others to save them or solve their problems.

It is true that they (almost) always saw setbacks as setbacks, not failures. And that in adversity they would ask, 'What are our choices here?' and make a plan.

It is true that they no longer feared frost or famine.

But peace and tranquility?

The hospitality business may have brought freedom from famine, but it also brought changes, so they argued—often. They argued about what to charge their guests (because you can only use so much grain). They formed committees and argued about who should be on them and when to open and close the spa season. They argued about how many cottages to build and where they should be. They even argued whether their notices should say that the spa was suitable for romantic couples, for some were sure that it would be unseemly to suggest such a thing.

But their village had new vitality, hope and confidence. No one ever moved away or even spoke of it.

And what of the child?

Now that they no longer needed a single leader, she was happy to be just one of the villagers, though she still accepted their invitations to address them on ceremonial occasions.

She still featured in the legends of the valley. But before long, The Seven, who had driven out the wolves, and especially the miller and the tinker, who had shown them the new power of persuasion, became more prominent (and the stories lost nothing in the telling).

Eventually, it was her grandchildren who would ask about the old days. She would answer that yes, she was proud to have played a part, but that the real heroes were the original people of the village. They had developed their resilience. They had taken charge of their lives, chosen to be happy, felt fear and fought it; and found their own solutions, even to wolves and famine.

10 Put the 15 key ideas into action

(You'll find the complete list at the end.)

Decide that your resilience is up to you.

'I bring not magic, but insight. And the answer to your troubles lies within your own hearts.'

It's an outstanding characteristic of resilient people that they believe they are in charge of their own lives.

At the beginning of our story the villagers are passive victims of wolves, expecting someone else to provide a solution. Their resilience builds slowly as they come to realise that they can take control of their situation.

Research in 45 countries has revealed big differences in the way people respond to the question, 'Is success determined by forces outside our control?' In the United States only 32 per cent answered yes. In South Korea, 75 per cent thought yes was the better answer.

If we find ourselves believing that our success depends on luck, or fate or other people, we can choose to change. Choosing to take charge of our own lives is the supreme liberating choice and all others stem from it.

Treat even doing nothing as a choice.

'We can choose to give in to hunger and the wolves. We can starve and let the wolves overrun this village, and say we could do nothing about it. That would be a choice.'

It's useful to see the do nothing option as a choice. Sometimes it's the best choice, though clearly not in our story. If we decide it's a choice, we feel encouraged to examine it and compare it with our other choices. Whether we take it or reject it, we are in control.

Focus on liberating choices.

Choose the liberating choices that seem most relevant to your life at the moment.

The child recommends that the villagers choose to take action and choose courage despite their fear. We can do the same, especially if our challenges are less dramatic than wolves or famine.

You might decide that you can choose your attitude, whatever the circumstances.

The Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl observed fellow prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who ‘walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread’. He wrote that when everything else is taken from us, we still have ‘the last of the human freedoms; to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way’.

We might decide to be positive and look for opportunities in recession or to stay focused and determined in business when our sales fall and competitors move into our market. We might decide to remain pleasant while a colleague is grumpy today, not because we are a doormat, but because we know we can always choose our attitude.

We might choose to think independently. It might mean taking a stand on an issue that’s important to us. It might mean questioning conventional thinking and living by our values, not the expectations that others impose on us.

We might choose *to let go of the past*—past hurts, embarrassments, resentments, guilt, conflicts and feelings of failure.

We can ask ourselves if it’s useful to have those feelings and keep revisiting the causes. If there is something we can learn from the experience, and we have learned it, it is time to move on. We might want to right a wrong, mend a relationship or apologise to someone we have hurt, but we must make a choice to move on from regular, intrusive, negative thoughts about the past.

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Inés Aréizaga Esteva (Spain), 25 years old
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As for embarrassments, the research shows that most people don't notice or don't remember the causes of our embarrassment anyway. Those who do are surprisingly understanding. They can imagine how they would feel if the same thing happened to them.

We might choose to be proactive. The child asks the villagers to join her in finding wolves in the forest and checking how much food they have left after the frost. She leads them to look for solutions, rather than wait passively for wolves, winter and famine.

Let's acknowledge that being proactive could put us on permanent high alert and have us wasting time and worrying as we prepare for things that will probably never happen. First, we need to decide whether the situation calls for a plan.

Think of setbacks as setbacks, not failures.

'We have failed,' whispered the tailor, falling to his knees. 'Our village depended on us and we failed.'

'It is not a failure' replied the child. 'That would suggest it is forever.'

'What is it then?'

'It is a setback. We will find another way.'

What we tell ourselves about things that go wrong is a measure of our resilience.

Resilient people assume they can succeed, so when something goes wrong, it can't be permanent. They will tell themselves that bad events will pass, or even better, there is something that they can learn from the experience to get a different result next time.

Even if we usually see our setbacks as failures, we can choose to change. After a while our thinking habits will change too.

People who can only see failure when others would see a setback are more likely to be depressed. It's especially likely if they believe they are entirely responsible and that it will affect everything they do.

A pessimist would take being laid off more personally than an optimist. He is more likely to believe that he won't be able to find another job and possibly that being unemployed will ruin his whole life. It's natural of course, to have those feelings when you first hear the news, but a resilient person recovers his equilibrium quickly.

An optimist would see being laid off as the result of her employer needing to reduce staff in hard times. She would focus on a plan to find a new position, so that losing her job was just a setback.

It's the same when we strive for a goal and don't succeed. For an optimist, it's neither personal nor permanent. For a pessimist, it's both.

It's easier to stay optimistic, persistent and resilient if our goals are realistic. Rather than aim for perfection, it's better to strive to exceed our previous personal best. Aiming to be perfect right away is not a perfect strategy. Studies show that people who believe that anything less than a gold-medal achievement is a failure are less resilient. The least resilient people are those who strive for perfection to please others.

Choose to keep believing in yourself.

'But we have chosen to believe that we can succeed,' replied the child.

They sat on the ground, then realised that they could not escape her eyes.

'We expected obstacles. Now we have found them, but we must continue to believe in ourselves and our success. That is a choice we must make, for only luck would otherwise bring us victory.'

It may seem false when our confidence has taken a knock to insist that we keep believing in our eventual success, but think of Britain's wartime prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill. He suffered from deep depression from his school days through his adult life, yet there's no hint of depression or pessimism in 'We shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds; we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall never surrender.' He may have felt less than confident, but knew he had a duty to himself and his nation to keep believing that Britain would win.

It can be very challenging to stay on track—to calmly look for ways to learn from the experience and develop a plan to help us restore our equilibrium. We have to ask ourselves whether the alternative of abandoning hope is useful, especially when we compare it with what we might learn from the setback.

The research shows that keeping our belief in ourselves is the most important issue. What we learn from our setbacks is a valuable added benefit.

Researchers have found that top performers in sport generally have an unsentimental approach to frank feedback. They seek it out and they have little interest in praise, because that won't lift their performance. Top performers have a strong belief in themselves, so they don't feel they need to defend it. Inviting criticism of their performance is like creating a setback, simply for the opportunity to learn.

If we are turned down for job after job it's understandable that we might abandon hope, but clearly not useful. Is there something we could learn by calling the last people who interviewed us and asking for suggestions for next time? We may not like what we hear, but it could provide us with the breakthrough. It's the same for proposals and business cases that don't generate the interest we expected.

If your sales are down ensure the whole team looks for what you can all learn from each setback and develop a plan. Keep updating the plan as the learning continues.

We can use the same ideas in our relationships. Let's say we have agreed to argue more constructively and have developed some specific rules, and then have a major row. We can reflect on what went wrong and learn from it, rather than assume that the relationship is unsalvageable. Psychologists have found that taking that long-term view combined with generous goodwill are outstanding features of successful intimate relationships. It's surely the same for people who work together.

Attribute your successes to your potential or ability.

'For now, rejoice in your success, for it shows that we are people who can triumph over adversity. It is a sign that even surviving famine is within our grasp.'

Real optimists take their successes personally and attribute them to durable factors such as potential or ability.

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If sales are up, or your job interview went well, ensure that you see it as evidence of your talents. It's not enough to say that you succeeded because you worked hard. Obviously it's worth noting and repeating, but resilient people and teams believe in themselves even more than what they do to succeed.

You might want to be modest about your successes and say 'I was lucky,' but it's what you tell yourself that counts. Luck is neither personal nor durable. Unless you win a lottery, there will be something you have done that you can attribute to your ability or potential.

When in doubt, look for your choices.

The child thought for a moment. 'It may be that we cannot summon from all our minds a better choice than to abandon our village. But I say this with all my heart: let us not choose hopelessness. It may yet be possible to share a future together in this beautiful place. Let us consider all our choices.'

Actively looking for choices is at the heart of resilience. It's liberating to know that we can always choose—even if it is simply to choose our attitude to a situation we cannot change.

When we ask, 'What are our choices?' we are reinforcing our belief that our success is up to us, not luck or fate or other people. We are beginning to take control.

Choose real optimism so you can deal with reality, not deny it.

'The baker stood immediately. 'You may think that you have heard the words of an optimist. But our friend's optimism is not of a useful kind.'

We need to separate real optimism from simply being positive and, especially, denial. When people say, 'Don't worry everything will be okay,' then do nothing when they should, that's denial. Hope without action is usually surrendering to luck.

Real optimism comes from healthy habits of self-talk—attributing our successes to our ability or potential, and attributing our setbacks to something other than our ability or potential.

The healthy habits begin with facing reality and believing that we can overcome our hurdles.

Resilient people face the facts of their situation, but don't fuss too much about their ability to succeed. If they are combining hope with action, they are far more likely to succeed than being pre-occupied with their abilities.

There are limits. If we recognise that we don't yet have the ability to overcome a challenge, we can develop it or look for help. We may even decide to accept the situation, but improve our lives in other ways.

If you were diagnosed with a terminal illness, you might decide that you would fight back with a positive spirit and all the treatment available. Once you had exhausted the treatment, you might choose to improve your life by spending time with family and friends, or perhaps in travel or other things you had always wanted to do. Denying you had the disease would simply shorten your life even more.

Look for reality somewhere between denial and catastrophising.

‘Many will die of fever and hunger; first the weak, then the young. Let us decide now how we will distribute the food we have.’

‘You go too far!’ protested the miller. ‘You speak of fever and death from famine as if they were as certain as the seasons themselves. They are not.’

Consider reframing your initial anxious reaction to bad news. Ask yourself for the evidence that the worst may happen. Is there another way of interpreting the evidence? How might the situation change if you were to take action? Act like a skeptical friend helping you sort truth from panic or denial.

If there’s a possibility that you may lose your job, you may be able to find out how strong that possibility is. Resist the temptation to allow your mind to send you into a downward spiral of catastrophising such as, ‘Other firms will be shedding jobs too, so I won’t get another. We won’t be able to pay the mortgage and the bank will force us to sell the house, then we’ll lose all our savings...’ Once you have discovered the truth of your situation, as best you can, you could come up with a plan such as updating your CV, networking and contacting the employment agencies.

Use the four secrets of happiness.

The child sensed hopelessness and misery. ‘In such times,’ she said, ‘we must remind ourselves that we can choose hope and happiness whenever we want.’

They looked puzzled and the washerwoman replied quietly, ‘Let us wait till the famine has passed. We can be happy then.’

‘Why wait?’ asked the child with a smile, and for the first time she did seem to them very like a child.

Think of happiness as an important way to work on your resilience.

Choose to be happy now

Most people are in ‘pursuit of happiness’ as the American Declaration of Independence puts it, but it’s simpler and perfectly possible to choose happiness now. Working on our happiness doesn’t seem strange if we can stop thinking of happiness as something that happens to us, or something we earn by achieving goals.

The happiness might not be glowing euphoria, particularly if we are up against major challenges such as unemployment, a relationship or business crisis, or serious illness, but we might find happiness in worthwhile activities or a sense of mission. Aristotle spoke of eudaimonia. Roughly translated it means ‘doing and living well’. Campaigning for another job, actively fighting a disease, immersing ourselves in a hobby or project, can give us that kind of quiet glow. So can providing a safe and healthy home life for our children, supporting our partner through a difficult patch, leading a meeting well or finding a solution to a problem.

Happiness has rewards beyond pleasure and resilience. A study of nuns in Wisconsin and Maryland showed that those who wrote about their lives most cheerfully lived longer—on average, seven years longer than the least cheerful.



“I studied English for 16 years but...
...I finally learned to speak it in just six lessons”

Jane, Chinese architect

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Be grateful

Being grateful for what we have may seem superficial, but it is surprisingly powerful. Researchers have found that people who fill in ‘gratitude diaries’ are significantly happier than those who just record events. Writing a letter or visiting someone to express our gratitude can make both receiver and giver happier for up to three months.

Consider asking yourself, your partner and your children, ‘What was the best thing about today?’ Vary the words, but make it a habit—even on the most difficult days.

Savour life’s joys

It’s a Buddhist idea and checks out in research. It may be as simple as focusing on the taste of your coffee, the crunch of gravel under your feet, the pleasure of good company, the warmth of a fire, or the view from a window—whatever gives you even momentary pleasure. It’s the habit that counts. Savouring might mean sharing your enjoyment with your partner or co-worker, writing about it, painting it, photographing it, or simply stopping to experience it fully.

Build your relationships

The power of building our relationships reflects the fact that our brains are wired to make us social beings. We consider solitary confinement a hardship, and for extended periods, cruel. Building our relationships not only makes us happier, but having a network of supportive friends and family helps us manage our worries.

The next step to develop your happiness quotient might be to see the work you do as a mission, something bigger than making things or putting bread on the table. If your mission involves developing or enhancing your relationships, so much the better. The blacksmith doesn’t just make ploughs and tools on his anvil, he provides his fellow villagers with a service they value.

You might set goals to add new purpose to your life. If you are retired or unemployed, perhaps it will be helping with kids’ sports or volunteering in your community. If you are in business, perhaps it will be preserving the business through recession, or making it a good employer or a good corporate citizen.

Researchers have found that the goals that make us happiest are those that use the things we are good at doing, help us grow and are useful, particularly to other people.

Discover the truth of your situation.

‘We must also go to the fields, orchards and gardens. Let us examine every plant and every tree to discover whether it may provide us with some sustenance for the winter.’

Research on stress-hardy people shows that they take control early. They make a plan and remain committed to it. The plan must reflect reality, so we need to set aside our fears and assess our situation carefully.

Stress-hardy people also remain committed to their relationships and see stressful situations as a challenge. The researchers call those three elements: control, commitment and challenge, 'the three Cs of hardiness'. They've found that people who use all three are not only more resilient, but significantly healthier.

Note all your newly-hatched ideas. They may spark others.

'Wait,' called the child. 'The idea may not be perfect, but it is newly-hatched. Let us not abandon it without thought, for it is the only idea we have. Even if it does not survive our scrutiny, it may spark another.'

Brainstorming works better if we allow the ideas to flow without judging them. Most of our creativity comes from taking an existing idea and using it in some other way.

When we are brainstorming in a group, there's a danger that the most dominant person will stifle other people's ideas. Generate all the ideas the whole group can think of before you evaluate them.

Look back at your progress regularly and attribute it to your ability or potential.

'We meet today as a village with freedom from famine within our reach.' A few clapped wet hands. 'Let us look back at all that we have achieved, for it reveals what kind of people we are and what lies ahead for us.'

'We chose to take charge of our lives.'

'We chose happiness and courage over hopelessness.'

'We drove the wolves from the forest.'

'We chose to believe we could succeed when famine threatened us.'

Whether you are in a group, or facing adversity on your own, celebrate your progress.

Nothing encourages success as much as success. But it's more than that. Acknowledging your progress gives you a chance to link your performance so far with your potential.

Let's take some examples. They're about healthy habits of belief and self-talk. Modesty is what you say to other people.

'I'm making good progress with my plan and it shows that I have the ability to rebuild the business. I'm the kind of person who succeeds when the going gets tough.'

‘We’ve had our problems, but we’ve worked our way through our last three disagreements and ended up feeling good about our relationship. We’re on our way to having a very good relationship again.’

‘I’ve done my full quota of appointments this week. I’ve had some setbacks, but I’ve been getting myself back on track each time. I’m becoming the kind of salesperson the company needs when the going gets tough.’

‘We’re developing our resilience as a team. Last season being even five points down would have made us despondent. We’ve had that four times this season and although we haven’t always won in the end, we’ve always seen it as a challenge and closed the gap. The fans will be starting to notice that we’re a team with the mental toughness we need to win the series.’

Use your setbacks to discover valuable information.

‘We have learned that we may be too far from Gudgeon for our offer to seem tempting; that the people here believe that wolves control the forest; and that they prefer a bath in a barrel under their own stars to the unknown charms of our pond.’

The miller and the tinker use their setbacks to develop a better plan. In the end, that’s what makes them successful. An early modest success might have encouraged them, but they could have missed the opportunity to learn all their potential customers’ objections and answer them in advance.

Remind yourself that you have learned from setbacks before and overcome them, and you can do it again. Make the reminders a mantra. It’s essential that you don’t allow yourself to slip into a downward spiral. It’s a much greater risk if you are prone to pessimism or depression.

Be prepared to accept new ways.

‘Friends, we have learned new ways. Each time we had a setback, we looked at what it could teach us. A pond does not excite interest. A spa does.’

Adversity invites us to change. The villagers in our story overcome the adversity of famine with a solution that guarantees them food every winter, but it would not have happened if they had not been open to change.

If we have learned helplessness, it may take a long time to develop a more optimistic outlook on life. Even when things are generally going well, a setback may take us back to old habits of thinking and self-talk.

Control and focus are the remedies. Accept that losing our equilibrium is a natural thing, but assess the situation, come up with a new plan and stay focused on all the key ideas in our story.

11 The 15 ways to develop your resilience

1. Decide that your resilience is up to you.
2. Focus on liberating choices.
3. Choose *real* optimism so you can deal with reality, not deny it.
4. Discover the truth of your situation.
5. Look for reality somewhere between denial and catastrophising.
6. When in doubt, look for your choices.
7. Treat even doing nothing as a choice.
8. Be prepared to accept new ways.
9. Note all your newly-hatched ideas. They may spark others.
10. Think of setbacks as setbacks, not failures.
11. Choose to keep believing in yourself.
12. Attribute your successes to your potential or ability.
13. Use your setbacks to discover valuable information.
14. Use the four secrets of happiness.
15. Look back at your progress regularly and attribute it to your ability or potential.



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About the Author

Ralph speaks to conferences and leads workshops throughout New Zealand and in Asia and Australia. He specialises in the psychology of success.

His series 'What successful people really do' and 'The village that could' are in Bookboon's Premium collection. He has written three other books, academic papers on psychology and more than a hundred blogs and articles.

Ralph has a background in psychology, business and journalism. (His career includes more than 12 years as a journalist for Television New Zealand and on secondment to the BBC.)

In 2011, Professional Speakers Australia awarded him the CSP – the highest international accreditation for professional speakers.

Ralph founded what is now Skillset New Zealand more than 30 years ago and remains its managing director. Skillset's clients are amongst New Zealand's largest organisations.