

Navigating in the Twilight Zone

(A Guide to Clarity During Crisis)

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A Word from the Author

We are social creatures. Unless you live the life of an isolate, a time will come when someone you care about needs help.

Whether the call comes in the early morning or in a doctor's office at mid-day, it will likely come. At a moment's notice, you may be asked to navigate in a world with little certainty. That's what friends and family do, sometimes. And whether or not you feel prepared, you may find that the job falls on your shoulders.

The good news is you will be carried if you relax. The bad news is that you will forget that.

When you do, here are a few tips from someone who has walked this path before. Print out the sheet on the next page and keep it with you as you move through this challenging and transformational journey. You are not alone.

Crisis with Clarity: A Navigational Tip Sheet

- There is a clarity that comes from the body's reaction to crisis. You can count on it.
- Breathe. Deeply. Three times.
- While you're breathing, look reality straight in the eye and decide what to do next.
- If you can't do that, ask someone you trust to help with health care or financial decision-making.
- Ask the magic question of those in charge: What would you do if this were your child (parent/sister/pet/friend)?
- Remember: It's not personal (and yet it helps to be personally present for the process).
- Exercise however you can so that you can sleep.
- Pray. However you do it. Ask friends to do the same.
- Play music. Sing. Read or recite poems.
- Be specific about other help you'll need. Don't wait for others to offer.
- People want to help. Call on your community. If there's an article in the newspaper, use that as an opportunity to ask for what you need. Use [Facebook](#), [Caring Bridge.org](#), [Lotsahelpinghands.com](#).
- You will get to the other side. But first you will go through it. With support. You are not alone.

Navigating in the Twilight Zone

Susan Grace Beekman

It's 3 A.M. The phone rings. Your mind jumps into hyperspeed.

Do you know where your child is? Your ailing parent? Your spouse or best friend?

Although you get to the phone before the answering machine picks up at ring five, the trip seems like slow-mo underwater ballet. You receive the dreaded news. This is bad. Real bad. Maybe you go to the room at the hospital with the puffy couches before they tell you how bad. But at some point soon it's clear that someone will need to be fully available to manage the emergency for the foreseeable future.

You have just entered the Twilight Zone of Caring (TZC) that most of us will visit in our lives more often than we like to believe. Your world suddenly has nothing in common with the mild-mannered life you had been navigating only the day before. All you know is that, for a time, you will need your best wits about you, perhaps served up with a little divine intervention, to be able to do truly help someone you love.

I've been to this netherworld more than once in my life. In fact, I've found myself there way more than you want to know. And in the process I've discovered amazing pools of reserves, a deep and calm wisdom, and a lot of good news in the middle of crises. The last time I made the trip was when my single twenty-something son was badly burned and lost everything in an apartment fire. When I first talked to the doctor at the Burn Center, he said we were about to begin a marathon. *A marathon?* I thought. *Don't people usually train for those?*

What I discovered is that I *had* been in training. Although it's true that I had been taking a low-key strength conditioning class and I'd been walking *almost* every day, I had a hunch that this probably wasn't enough. Perhaps the most helpful training had been a dogged commitment to yoga. But it turns out that the most useful experiences came from the times I had visited TZC before—and trusted my gut. I had developed a sense of the terrain. I had internalized a map of fiery pits to avoid and a knack for finding and recognizing magical helpers when they come along. I was no longer a stranger in a strange world. I knew I could find my way.

And so can you. Here's a brief traveler's guide to the Twilight Zone of Caring for the next time you find yourself assisting loved ones in life-threatening emergencies, whether it's a 5K run or a triathlon.

Remember that stress is your friend.

The first piece of good news comes from your body's stress response. Remember how long it took you to get to the phone? This is due to adrenaline, which is only an evil villain when it's over-functioning in stalled traffic or in other pseudo-challenges of daily life. According to Stanford's Robert Sapolsky, a leading expert on stress, adrenaline in

time of crisis gives immediate energy and a kind of tunnel vision, and it also shuts down pain. You may “freeze” or you may go into a “fight” response (there’s also flight, but we’re not going there.) Your heart rate goes up, and everything not essential in your body shuts down, including planning and worrying. An early response to adrenaline is often unusual clarity. So you can truly rely on your body’s natural response to help you move through the maze with a minimum of freak-outs.

Decide your role.

Once your startle response of freezing has passed, a likely impulse is to engage full-throttle, thanks to all those stress hormones coursing through your body. But before going further, STOP. Take a breath and ask your own inner counsel how much of the crisis is yours to manage. Take some time out. Talk to a trusted advisor. If you’re convinced that you’re one of those being called to provide navigation for this journey, begin your trip preparation.

Draw strength from religious or spiritual practices.

Entrance into the TZC requires a deep surrender to the unknown. Each time we let go to the things we can’t possibly understand, we instantly skirt the fiery pit of fear and worry. According to spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, “when you surrender, a new dimension of consciousness opens up. Circumstances and people become helpful, cooperative. Coincidences happen. If no action is possible, you rest in the peace and inner stillness that come with surrender.” Pray, meditate, light candles, ask the chaplain for guidance. Most faith traditions also actively send healing prayer to those in need. Ask. Ask. Ask.

When my son was in a medically induced coma for five weeks, healers and ministers from every faith tradition came to offer healing prayer. When I talked to the chaplain about this, he was more than helpful.

“We’d need a special dispensation if you want to use fire,” he said. Under the circumstances, since we were in the Burn Unit, this struck me as hysterically funny. As it turns out, Native American healers before us had used sage as a part of the service, and the hospital had supported that practice.

Although your loved one may be in a coma, there is ample evidence that they receive the benefit of words and loving energy when they aren’t conscious. Invite the healing and practitioners and religious leaders to the patient’s bedside. The side benefit is that you will receive healing and love at the same time.

We discovered after the ordeal that friends in our home community from all faiths had gathered to pray and meditate for Ben. A prayer wheel in Nepal was turned for him. His photo was placed on altars and in churches across the country. Whenever I felt weak, I thought of the hundreds of prayers headed my way and knew I would know the next best thing to do.

Gather information.

Ask doctors, social workers, nurses, other patient's families. These are often magical (and practical) helpers, people who have just the piece of information you need at just the right time. Get an idea of likely scenarios: three weeks or six months? Years? You need this information to pace yourself. Ask, "How would you plan if this were your loved one? Depending on how serious the situation is, the kindest thing you can do for yourself may be to resign from Life as You Know It for the time being. This decision will give you the peace of mind to be truly present with your loved one.

Pace Yourself.

Just as any marathon, you'll need to monitor your strength and keep in mind the the long view. Reduce caffeine. Make rest a priority. Take breaks to walk or sit in a garden or chapel at the hospital. Allow yourself to leave the bedside for a good meal or a little trek. (We found our bicycles for stress release). If you run for release, keep running. Take multiple walks daily. Go to a gym or take a yoga class near the hospital. Find a counselor or other professional to walk the path with you. Herbs or medications can help if you're having trouble sleeping or coping.

Put things in order.

Pay bills. Cut off the paper. Pack your local phone book and anything you find comforting: relaxing CDs, your iPod, tea. A laptop computer is a godsend for communicating and recording information. A small journal can be priceless. If looks to be a long stay, plan ahead for times to go home and take care of business.

Decide what responsibilities you can eliminate.

Divide a piece of paper into two columns. In the first, write everything you do in a typical week. Next, add anything you imagine might help during this critical time. Include everything from making soup to yard maintenance to cookies for the staff at the hospital. (Cookies equal instant camaraderie.) On the right, list who else might do it...besides you.

Ask for help.

You might get a call from a reporter early on. This isn't usually a time you're thinking of the financial implications of the crisis. However, it's the right time to set up an account so that people can contribute. There are also lots of things people can do that don't cost money. You'll be amazed. People you may not even know will show up to help, especially when there's a specific task. If it looks like a long haul, ask a friend (or friends) to coordinate needs. Technology has made this infinitely easier.

The fire that burned my son's apartment and half of his body was a visible public event in a medium-sized town. There were three Benefits (his name is "Ben"). The outpouring of love and support allowed him to meet his medical bills and re-start his life once he was out of danger. All of this would not have been possible had we not made his need known.

Decide how you will communicate with friends, family and well-wishers.

It's a tremendous drain of your energy to be answering random phone calls to inform or reassure. Delegate a friend to manage a phone tree. Caringbridge.org is an invaluable and easy-to-use website for posting information and collecting messages from guests. We posted updates every day or two at first, and we noticed that often 300 or more people had checked it within an hour. Since the accident, strangers have told me how much they benefited from the site, and they had also used it in their own health crisis.

Lotsahelpinghands.com is designed to communicate with friends and family and to coordinate the kind of help that is needed. Ask a friend or volunteer to manage this site and communicate through email.

Keep the long view.

A journal can be a helpful tool for perspective. Keep lists to leave yourself some breadcrumbs to follow and remember that **you will return**. Although it may seem like endless twilight, you will pass through to the other side. Journeys to the TZC do end.

It's a gradual process to recover from such a trauma. Unlike many other journeys, the ending point isn't marked on a map. There will be new revelations as you revisit the event. For instance, we discovered a few months after the fire a couple of things that astound me still.

Ben, a deep sleeper, had lived alone in his apartment and had managed to wake up with his bed on fire and get out the door. The doctor told us that this is very unusual. Usually the carbon monoxide keeps the victim asleep until it's too late. The Fire Marshall told us a couple of months after the event that the house had hit "flash point" and exploded one minute after Ben was out the door.

These facts leave me wordless. Simply awestruck. Humble and grateful.

These revelations and many others have taken time to absorb. Just as Ben required physical therapy and ongoing care for his wounds, he has continued to put together the pieces from this life-changing event. But that would be his story.

It's been four years since the fire. We've all moved on in our lives. We've forged a stronger family connection and a deeper respect for life. Our bond with community and friends is firmer and stronger. Gratitude is present almost every time I walk out the door.

I'm navigating the ordinary daylight world once again, but peace, stillness, and a renewed faith in the kindness of strangers; all gifts from the twilight journey are with me still.