

As my employees and I navigate through the pandemic crisis, our days are filled with problem solving and constant adaptation to an ever-changing landscape while still carrying out of the mission of enriching our communities and our students' lives. But after long days of dealing with the pandemic and the effects on our college in my quiet hours after work each evening I have been contemplating more philosophical ideas.

There are two schools of thought about what happens to one as they go through a difficult time. The first is that crisis builds character. There are many wonderful stories in literature about a young naïve protagonist who goes into the abyss, through a great trial, defeating enemies, and rising to the challenges to emerge on the other side a transformed hero. Here we see that without the adversity the hero may never have been made. He or she needed the abyss to become the ultimate version of themselves.

The other school of thought is a bit more cynical and is best summed up with a famous quote most often attributed to the author James Lane Allen, "Adversity does not build character, it reveals it." In this argument, our young protagonist was always a hero, he just hadn't gone into the abyss yet to prove it to himself and others. His hero status was just waiting to be revealed.

One only has to read the stories of the vast army of essential workers who are keeping things going to see this character revealed. Think of all of the health care workers, first responders, grocery store and convenience store employees, utility employees, and on and on, going to work every day despite the risk. Heroes are everywhere.

But to be even more cynical, the quote gets at something else. During adversity some reveal they are no hero at all - in fact, just the opposite. It is easy to believe in your fellow man, in the golden rule, and that love will conquer all when all is going well or when temptation is not around. Lane's quote also implies some may appear to be a hero but when times get tough they reveal that they never really were.

There are also stories of hoarding and profiteering going on as well. Unfortunately, their character has been revealed too.

Personally, I have been impressed with my family who is using this time beyond working or completing classes, to better themselves while at home. My wife Jen is learning a Japanese embroidery technique called sashiko. My seventeen-year-old daughter Alayna is learning some new origami tricks making paper boxes that are just beautiful, and my nineteen-year-old daughter Abrielle is learning to play the ukulele and is getting pretty good!

Of course this is sprinkled in with LOTS of movies, puzzles, games, and the occasional performance, with impromptu concerts and reciting of poems and soliloquies. Cabin fever is real, but we are trying to make the most of it. The girls have gotten along great despite this situation, with very little complaining and fighting. They are revealing the character that their mom and I hoped they had.

At the college our faculty are learning new techniques of teaching online, both with live web conferencing and through "traditional online" if I can use that apparent oxymoron. They have stepped up to the challenge and are working very hard. Recently the president of the faculty senate, Prof. Alan Murray, revealed at the Board of Trustees meeting some wonderful quotes from students about this time and the faculty response to it - "The faculty have gone out of their way to work with me so I can succeed."

That is great to hear. While it hasn't been perfect and not every student is having a good experience we are not seeing mass drops from classes on a large scale. I am so impressed that both students and faculty are coping and succeeding.

Our staff and administration are adapting as well to working from home and in a new environment. Employees are finding innovative ways to connect with students through different means such as virtual tours, advising by web conference, electronic college fairs, etc. Nearly everyone is doing what they can to move the college forward and help students despite this disruption.

I could not be more proud of the employees of the college and our students. Through this crisis they have revealed they always had finest character. It turns out what I always suspected is true - they were heroes all along.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else, please email me at binbody@neosho.edu