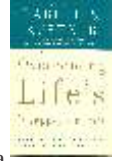


A Review on...

Overcoming Life's Disappointments



(Author: Harold S. Kushner; Publisher: Anchor Books,
A Division of Random House etc., New York–in America
and By Random House of Canada Ltd. Toronto in Canada, Cost: US \$-12.95)

*** Prof. Anila**

Just as pleasure is, pain is also an integral part of life of any individual. It is amazing that not many writers have ventured into look at it rationally and logically. Definitely it asks for a lot of strength to look at pain straight in the face and speak about it or write about it.

Harold Kushner is one of them who has shown the courage and strength to write about it. His ability to write in a straight forward manner on the subject seems to emanate from the fact that he has been a Rabbi. His elegant contemplations of the doubts and fears that arise when tragedy strikes an individual, which can be in various forms, speak a lot for his skill to write and reach out to the reader.

The book "Overcoming Life's Disappointments" by Harold Kushner is, in his own words, a tribute to the human quality of imagination, the ability to dream and to envision a better world than the one we live in and to the human quality of resilience, the ability to go on bravely when those dreams don't come true.

The book with 174 pages of matter presented in eight chapters excluding the first Words from the Author, has every chapter titled. Most are presented with a quote in the beginning. Each of the chapters deals with a specific concept related to man's disappointments.

Chapter One titled 'The Man who dared to dream' speaks about the need for people to respond to disappointments with faith in themselves and in their future, and to respond to heartbreak with wisdom instead of bitterness and depression. The next chapter, 'Who are you working for' asks the reader to learn to distinguish between "injuries to our soul" and "injuries to our sensibilities". While the former cannot be repaired, the latter may hurt but will heal, is the

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explanation given saying that when we open our hearts to pain and suffering, THEY begin to heal, not because suffering is redemptive but because opening our hearts is.

What does a person do with all the dreams that do not come true? The question gets answered in the third chapter, an answer that has been known to all and sundry ages over. 'Life is a hard road to tread and not a smooth one', is though known, gets relegated to the back of the minds of people until defeats, disappointments and devastations face one in the face. The right way to deal with all these, according to the author is - 'no matter what happens to you and no matter how hurtful or unfair it might be, all this is less important than what you do about what happens to you'. According to the author, people show an astonishing capacity for emotional healing. Understanding that pain and rejection are part of life and responding to the shattered dreams thereafter by saying that – 'I have learned how painful life can be and I want more of it because there is so much in life that is good and I don't want to miss out on it', is perhaps the best way to deal, according to Kushner.

'We must be willing to get rid of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us' is a quote by Joseph Campbell that is presented at the beginning of Chapter Four titled 'New dreams for old ones' and that summarises all that is contained in that chapter.

Kushner says, broken dreams, broken hearts and hopes unrealized should not be seen as emblems of shame or badges of failure. According to him, if anything, they are tokens of courage.

When we break a promise, something that sustains our world breaks, and, something vital and indispensable is preserved when we are strong enough and good enough to keep our word. Keeping one's promise is the cornerstone of a sense of responsibility and responsibility for one's behavior is the defining characteristic of a mature human being. Every individual, according to Kushner, will stand at crossroads of one's life when she/he will have to choose between personal gain and keeping a promise. In Chapter Five, Kushner implores on the readers to keep promises which are signs of one's inner strength and mature humanity. When promises are kept disappointments are at bay is what the author seems to say.

Chapter Six explores the meaning of the word 'Humility' for the reader, in all dimensions. Humility, Kushner says, is the realization that not everything that happens in life is all about you. Humility

means recognizing that you are not God and it is not your job or responsibility to run the world. There is something liberating about the insight that we may be unique but we are not indispensable. When something bad happens to us we may get over it. Similarly, when something good happens to us also we get over it. We may or may not deserve either. We may not even have earned it. What is important is, author says, that misfortune should not set us apart from happy and healthy people. It should connect us to all other people who may also be hurt, which only means, to all.

Learning from others' mistakes, especially from that of good and great people is perhaps one way to keep ourselves happy, Kushner says in Chapter Seven. Kushner focuses on five elements of a complete life: family, friends, faith, work and the satisfaction of making a difference. Kushner also, at the same time, speaks about the difficulty involved in making all the five happen. But making it happen is possible, he says, though not all at the same time.

Kushner says that venting one's feelings at God is much more acceptable than taking it out on others around us. Anger has been described by Kushner as swallowing poison to make someone else sick.

Anger out of bitterness towards life needs to be handled by striking a balance between remembering and forgetting, Kushner says.

Kushner quotes psychiatrist George Vaillant for writing a happy ending to each of our biographies. Vaillant speaks about the willingness to forgive. Vaillant says forgiveness means cleansing one's soul of the bitterness of "what might have been", "what should have been" and "what didn't have to happen."

Kushner concludes by saying that complete blessing means experiencing life in its fullness lasting everything that life has to offer, the bitter and the sweet, the honey and the bee stings, love and loss, joy and despair, hope and rejection. Only then each of us can realize how full our life has been and how richly we are blessed.

The whole book has the stamp of a Rabbi as Kushner explicates everything that he has to say with reference to the life of Moses. Infact, the cover page of the book proclaims it with the words – Learning from Moses how to cope with frustration.

Each and every concept is explained by bringing the story of Moses.

In fact, Moses is the hero here. It is amazing to note the way several authors and their books have been quoted by Kushner. There are also

interpretations made of some of the contents in the life of Moses, like the reference to 'three days of darkness', Kushner writes – The darkness could not have been caused by solar eclipse, which lasts for minutes and not days, perhaps sandstorm blocked the sun.

There are incidents from real life brought in to authenticate certain statements made. Kushner, takes from every available medium, be it a book, a stage play, a poem or a movie, to put across his opinions.

This is definitely not a quick -fix solution to disappointments. Kushner elaborates on every aspect of pain to say that any and every individual is capable of turning one's life into a more productive one instead of allowing oneself to wallow in self-pity. He goes on to say that any individual who understands that he/she is doing something that is making a difference to people, is able to bear any burden, and steps out of that sense of futility successfully.

There are examples provided from real life incidents of great people to say how they became great despite severe setbacks in life.

How Abraham Lincoln fought depression and despair, not only during the years of the civil war but also throughout his life is specified. There is reference to Hollywood Actor Christopher Reeve and the courage displayed by him in the nine years following the accident that left him paralysed which shattered his near perfect life.

British physicist Stephen Hawking receives a mention in the book for his ability to revolutionise the world of physics with his insights even after being barely able to move or speak.

Kushner speaks about Holocaust victims and their ability to come back to restructure their lives.

What really authenticates this book is that the Author himself went through the devastating experience of losing his son to Progeria, a sickness in which a child's body ages faster at a very young age.

The book sums up, as Kushner himself puts it, with a reference to a book by psychiatrist Daniel Levinson titled 'The seasons of a man's life' in which Levinson refers to “the tyranny of the dream”,

All of us start out with dreams of how our lives will turn out; dreams of love, happiness, fame and fortune.

But in reality, life is more complicated than that. Nobody gets everything he or she yearns for.

Kushner makes the ultimate statement by saying that people should dream, dream boldly at that and trust their powers of resilience to see them through inevitable disappointments.