

**Reflection on “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” by Christine Spaeth,  
Genetic Counselor, written in her second year of genetic counseling training**

“...We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.”

Excerpt from Professor Nikki Giovanni’s Convocation speech at Virginia Tech  
April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007

Too often, we meet individuals who have more than their share of tragedy, like the family with 3 children with seemingly unrelated congenital birth defects or the woman who says that cancer “ate up my family”. Sometimes it seems as though the people who have the fewest resources have a disproportionate amount of trouble, and we wonder how that could be fair. The absolute unfairness of a child suffering with a chronic illness becomes almost unbearable. We question why bad things happen to good people because it is impossible to have faith without a sense of justice, because a world without control is fickle and frightening, because we need to have a way to prevent those terrible things from happening to us. By blaming those who have tragedy, we hope to explain away our own risks and pretend we are safe.

We ask why bad things happen to good people because we need to find a reason. When explain to a family that a chromosomal anomaly is sporadic, and therefore unlikely to recur, we mean to be reassuring, but for so many people that is not reassuring news at all. People need an explanation for their bad news, so they can try to prevent it from happening again. When we are not able to provide an explanation, they are left in a situation they are unable to control. However, as Harold Kushner point out in his book,

people may be able to find a purpose in their bad news. It may show them strength they did not know they had or connect them to their community in a way unimaginable. That is where we can provide the hope in a hopeless situation.

People look to religion to help define a greater purpose and provide a moral framework for our lives, but too often people use religion to judge and blame others. I remember the minister of the Lutheran church I attended giving a sermon right after the devastating tornado that hit Montgomery a few years ago. He was outraged because a parishioner had said they were blessed that the tornado did not damage their house or our church; he asked if that meant that the victims were cursed or less religious? I believe that bad things happen to good people, but I refuse to believe in a supreme being who carelessly deals out suffering. I can believe in a supreme being that provides hope for those who are suffering.

While bad things happen to good people, bad things also reveal character and strength. I had the opportunity to work with a very wise counselor who has experienced more than her own share of tragedy. She told me that when asked by patients if she believes in miracles, she would reply that she did but that the miracles we get are often not the ones we asked for. Despite a personal history of infertility and pregnancy loss, she works in a prenatal setting and is the most compassionate and empathetic counselor I have ever met. That is the miracle. Harold Kushner used his experiences and his son's pain to write a book that has touched millions of people. That is the miracle.

The anniversary of the Virginia Tech shootings occurred while I was reading Harold Kushner's book and I happened across a transcript of poetry in one article. I was immediately struck by how Harold Kushner's book and Nikki Giovanni's poem explored

common themes: grief, search for explanation and meaning, finally replaced by hope and resiliency. Two eloquent authors from two different worlds coming to the same conclusion: bad things happen to good people because they can. It is what good people do with their experiences that ultimately matter.