

## Good or Bad? Maybe

I was late for court one day so I rushed out of my house, jumped into my car, and realized that I forgot my keys. I immediately got out of the car and stormed back to the house to look for my keys all the while telling myself, “Now I’m going to be really late!” Was forgetting my keys good or bad?

I’m back in the house, stressed out that I’m going to be late, and find my keys right next to the file I need to take to court that morning. Without that file my client’s hearing would have to be continued. My stress turned to relief. Was forgetting my keys good or bad?

Did your answer change? Wasn’t it the same event each time – forgetting my keys? What changed a seemingly “bad” event into a seemingly “good” event? What changed is your perspective with the benefit of time. And when your perspective changed, the “label” you assigned to the event changed.

But what if we didn’t label (judge) people, things, or events as good or bad? What if it’s impossible to know if something is good or bad until sometime in the future, if ever? What if learning to live without labeling your experiences as good or bad was the key to happiness and empowerment?

There’s an ancient parable that illustrates this lesson:

“Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer whose horse ran away. That evening, all of his neighbors came around to commiserate. They said, “We are so sorry to hear your horse has run away. This is most unfortunate.” The farmer said, “Maybe.” The next day the horse came back bringing seven wild horses with it, and in the evening everybody came back and said, “Oh, isn’t that lucky. What a great turn of events. You now have eight horses!” The farmer again said, “Maybe.” The following day his son tried to break one of the horses, and while riding it, he was thrown and broke his leg. The neighbors then said, “Oh dear, that’s too bad,” and the farmer responded, “Maybe.” The next day the conscription officers came around to conscript people into the army, and they rejected his son because he had a broken leg. Again all the neighbors came around and said, “Isn’t that great!” Again, he said, “Maybe.””<sup>1</sup>

While the neighbors went on a moment-to-moment roller-coaster ride of emotion, the farmer took each event in stride and remained even-keeled. That doesn’t mean that the farmer was emotionless or incapable of being happy or sad, it’s just that he had a greater perspective – he saw the big picture. He understood that no event, in and of itself, is good or bad. He understood that while he couldn’t control the events in his life, he could control his response and avoid the roller-coaster ride of emotions that affects your work and personal life. He understood that it’s only with time that you’ll get the whole story and be able to put events into perspective.

What about you? Are you more like the farmer or his neighbors?

Think of a time in your life when you were truly happy. Then look back and find the past events – both the ones you labeled good and the ones you labeled bad – that led to you being truly happy. Did you go on a roller-coaster ride of emotions to get there or did you remain even-keeled?

Is it possible that with time and perspective what you once considered bad is actually good?

Maybe.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many different versions of this parable. This version is from a lecture by Alan Watts that was eventually published. Watts, Alan. *Modern Life: Collected Talks 1960-1969*. New World Library, 2006. Print.