



Faith-Ann McGarrell



# CURVEBALLS AND LEMONADE:

## Surviving Change in Difficult Times

**W**hat do we do when life throws us a curveball? Some would say, “Hit it!” Others might respond, “Get out of its way!” The term *curveball*, taken from baseball, is a frequently used idiom in American English. In baseball, a pitcher may throw a curveball to confuse the hitter. Although launched with low velocity (typically 5 miles per hour slower than a regular fastball), the throw has a high spin, which causes it to take a sudden, unpredictable arc as it approaches the plate and the person at-bat.<sup>1</sup> The rate of speed and sudden downward turn trick the hitter into overestimating the ball’s trajectory, which often results in a strikeout or, worse, being struck by the ball. And so, as an idiom, the term means “a tricky, difficult, unusual situation due to the change in direction into an unusual place.”<sup>2</sup>

In early 2020, the world was thrown a global curveball. COVID-19 emerged slowly, picked up momentum, and continues to take arcs that no one can predict. Like the hitter at the plate, each of us must decide when and how to swing and what to do in the aftermath. One well-known quotation says, “When life throws you a curveball, hit it out of the park!”<sup>3</sup> Or, you may be more familiar with the proverbial “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!” In print, both aphorisms might sound comforting; the prospect of making something good out of something terrible fills us with opti-

mism and hope. Yet, in reality, the unpredictability of life can cause anxiety, worry, fear, heartbreak, sorrow, and a bevy of other emotions that can leave us drained, overwhelmed, and feeling hopeless. And so, finding practical ways to journey through very dark periods is essential for survival. Here are a few that I have found helpful:

### 1. Find an anchor.

Followers of Christ can find an anchor in biblical promises. We can spend time with our anchor, Jesus Christ, through prayer, daily Bible study, and staying connected with supportive, positive people in our lives. Hymn writer Priscilla Owens asked the question, “Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?” and answered with a resounding, “We have an anchor that keeps the soul.”<sup>4</sup> Scripture assures us that “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19, NIV).<sup>5</sup> For the Christian, hope *is* Jesus—that He came as our Redeemer and Savior<sup>6</sup> and, in doing so, promised to be sufficient for *any* challenge we may encounter until His return.

### 2. Feel the feelings.

Sometimes, we hit it out of the park and experience the exhilaration and euphoria that come from overcoming an immediate challenge. At other times, however, everything goes wrong, and we strike out, or life takes

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a horrible turn, and we have no power to stop it—it may even knock us down or throw us off balance. At such difficult times, we must permit ourselves to go through the process of mourning loss and experiencing feelings of discomfort. We must acknowledge our limitations as human beings living in a sinful world and accept the grace that only God can give (2 Corinthians 12:9). Individuals who take time to process difficult, traumatic experiences are better able to withstand difficulties in the future.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Stay connected.

Find ways to connect with others, collaborate, and share the load despite the circumstances. Social-distancing practices were necessary during the pandemic; however, this led to increased social isolation. These past two years have been difficult for almost everyone, especially older adults and at-risk populations.<sup>8</sup> Many of us have lost loved ones due to the pandemic and have been unable to grieve the loss in traditional ways, such as gathering in person with family and friends to mourn, comfort, and support one another. Some lost jobs, and as a result, were unable to maintain homes, pay tuition, or keep up with health insurance and daily living expenses. Some schools closed, while others switched to hybrid models of instruction, and, in the midst of it all, everyone struggled to find ways to stay connected.

To thrive, we need connections to other people. Journalist Tracy Brower interviewed Jeanie Stewart, a consultant at the NeuroLeadership Institute in New York, who observed that our sense of connection and belonging is deeply tied to the degree to which we identify with a group: “Being surrounded by other human beings doesn’t guarantee a sense of belonging.

Belonging has to do with identification as a member of a group and the higher quality interactions which come from that. It’s the interactions over time which are supportive of us as full, authentic human beings.”<sup>9</sup> As individuals navigating this challenging period of history, building and maintaining connections within our homes, schools, places of work, and worship are essential to our survival.

### 4. Be adaptable, flexible, and open-minded.

Almost every day, we hear statements and questions about when things will go back to normal. From the ominous “Times have changed” to the optimistic “This is the new normal!” many people wonder if life will ever go back to the way it was before COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> The world has changed. The Greek philosopher Herac-



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litus said, “Change is the only constant in life.”<sup>11</sup> But, before Heraclitus, King Solomon reflected on seasons of change: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” He proceeded to catalog these seasons of change—birth and death; planting and uprooting; building and tearing down; peace and war (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11). The apostle James challenged us to acknowledge that our lives are vapor; we do not know what the future holds. He wrote, “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (see James 4:13-15). Change is inevitable. In our individual lives, we must learn to adapt and be open to it to survive and make a difference in our homes, places of work, and places of worship.

### 5. Express gratitude.

Ultimately, find ways to express gratitude each day. Intentionally find something to be grateful for, no matter how small. Research shows that gratitude changes the brain over time by generating more activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, the decision-making area of the brain. Gratitude also has a physiological impact on heart and mental health; it stimulates lower blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and cortisol; promotes better sleep, and much more.<sup>12</sup> We are encouraged to give thanks in all things (Psalm 118; Philippians 4:6, 7). God has promised, “beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (see Isaiah 61:1-3). When life is sour and unpredictable, it may seem counterintuitive to express gratitude, but there is power in reflecting on the positive as we face the negative. The psalmist David said, “When hard pressed, I cried to the Lord; he brought me to a spacious place. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid” (Psalm 118:5, 6). Amid very dismal circumstances, we can experience confidence and calm in the presence of our anchor, Jesus Christ.

We hope the articles in this issue inspire you and stimulate ideas for improving instruction, nurturing spiritual growth in your schools, and connecting with the communities in which your schools exist. Above all, may you find ways to encourage your soul as you navigate this difficult time through anchoring in Jesus Christ, experiencing solid connections with others, and celebrating with expressions of gratitude for the many gifts God has provided.

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