

Navigating Turmoil Beyond Challenge and Adversity:  
Hill A and Hill B  
Tom Morris

Homer's classic poem *The Odyssey* is a book that's been read and loved for nearly three thousand years and by at least one hundred and fifty generations of human beings. Why? Now that I've read it many times in my own life, with three readings just last year, I think I finally know the answer. It's all about how to be a hero. It's about never giving up on the noble cause you have, on the mission and purpose that drives you forward. Our tragic hero Odysseus is described many times as "the storm tossed man," and as "a man of many sorrows." He's even said many times to be "the unluckiest man alive." He certainly goes through one awful and fantastical struggle after another in his determined effort to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War, where he has served with distinction as one of the top Greek military leaders and strategists. He never gives up his quest for home despite ten years of incredible obstacles that would have stopped most people many times over. He keeps up his valiant struggle with nearly endless adversity because of his noble goal to reunite with those he loves—his wife, son, father, and friends. He's the perfect example of why it's so important to have such a goal that guides us forward. Something we value deeply and with our whole hearts can shore up our courage and motivate us through every struggle, no matter how extremely hard the road may turn out to be.

Here's a simple image of struggle and challenge of a different sort that's meant a lot to me. I first told this story many years ago in the book *The Art of Achievement*. And I've repeated it hundreds of times in talks around the world. I initially used it to help readers and then top business audiences around the world see the importance of overcoming the pull of inertia throughout our careers and launching forth in new ways of working. But I've just come to understand how the image and story can apply powerfully to our challenging time right now. And its implications bring great hope.

Imagine that you're out in the woods on a hike, and around you there are some steep hills. Suppose you're leading a group, and together you set the goal of getting to the highest point in the area, from which you'll be able to survey all the surrounding terrain. Imagine now that the highest hill you can see from where you stand is one right in front of you. Let's call it Hill A. You want to get to the highest spot, and it looks like that point is atop Hill A. So you lead the group up the side of the hill. On the ascent, you all trip and slip and struggle and occasionally fall, but you help each other along, and with all your hard work, you get to the top together. Everyone feels great about what you've managed to accomplish. You may have a celebration and enjoy together the new view, at least until some fog lifts and suddenly, from your new vantage point, you can now see a hill nearby that's much higher. Let's call it Hill B.

If your goal is truly to get to the highest point in the area, then, after resting and taking in the view you already have, you'll need to lead the group onward. But what does that initially mean? If you now stand perched atop Hill A and want to get to what's actually the highest point in the area, the first thing that you'll have to do is: Go downhill. And when you as the leader point this out to everyone else, you probably know how they'll react. The response is almost universal. People tend to say or at least think things like, "What do you mean, we have to go downhill? It took us a long time to get up to

where we are, it was quite a climb, and it's actually very good here. We can see plenty from where we're already perched. Let's just stay right here and enjoy our success!"

At any given time, there are vastly many people and organizations and even families stuck on some version of Hill A, because nobody wants to go downhill. What does going downhill metaphorically represent? Changing what you've most recently been doing. Venturing forth to something new. It means getting out of your current comfort zone and perhaps hazarding a potentially treacherous descent. It can mean leaving your main knowledge zone or your skill area, and launching into something very uncertain. And, in virtue of all that, it means descending from the success you've already had, striking into the unknown, encountering new struggles, and likely stumbling in new ways. Furthermore, it's important to notice one aspect of our picture that's both surprising and revelatory: In the initial downhill phase, you'll superficially appear to be getting farther from your true goal. You'll be going lower, not higher.

In almost any big change effort, there's an initial downhill phase where people will seem to have left behind their former mastery and success and even basic competence in exchange for a new, potentially difficult struggle where things can at first appear to be getting worse and not better. Because of the near inevitability of this transitional time of trouble and discomfort, anxiety and regret and even dismay can become widespread, people often get genuinely discouraged, and it will be easy at some point for any of us to lose track of the importance of what we're doing, along with the loftiness and nobility of our ultimate goal that depends on this change, with all that it now involves.

As a leader, you'll need to help people focus on what's at stake throughout the entire process of making or even just living through any major new change. And at the time when people are most discouraged or even afraid, just being able to point out the rough universality of this initial downhill struggle in any new adventure can help calm nerves, settle dispositions, dispel negativity, and allow people to focus on the noble value of their quest.

Before his death in 2002, the distinguished Harvard philosopher Robert Nozick had spoken of this general distinction between a high hill and a much loftier one as, in principle, that between "a local maximum" and what he called "a global maximum." The great thinkers would caution us never to allow what's very good to keep us from what's best—not to let our first success, or resulting habits and comforts, prevent us from the next adventure we need to launch. What Nozick called a local maximum may just be a stage along the way to the greater global maximum we might need to pursue.

Inevitably, a higher Hill B, a greater summit of some sort, awaits us. Those who are not willing to go downhill initially from where they now are and struggle to get to that higher point will miss all the great value that's to be attained only in the adventure along the path and finally up at the loftier summit. And this is a vital point not to miss. In any such journey, the value is to be found not just at the next peak, but also on the trail. It's ultimately the quest itself, the struggle of the journey or adventure, that forms us into the people we're capable of being. The difficulty deepens us and grows us.

In any business context, a lot may be at stake if you can't persevere through the ups and downs of the sometimes-arduous expedition to get to where you need to go. Some competitors almost inevitably will. And as a result, the market will come to reflect the attainments of the most courageous and adventurous, and then require such journeys

from any others who would prosper in that domain. Life moves forward, whether we're willing to do so or not. Those who hang back too long almost always miss out on the great good they could have attained.

One of the chief sources of wisdom in life is to know what to embrace and what to release. The best approach to our professional and personal lives is to keep on the lookout for the next great adventure we may need to embrace, and to be open to whatever initial descent it might take to release our current peak or plateau of success, and let go enough to make the new journey happen, to move from the known into the unknown. To get to what's best, we most often have to give and do our best. And that again is where Odysseus can be our guide.

An executive who heard me speak on "True Success in Changing Times" many years ago posted to me on social media this week that this little story about the two hills was helping her to deal with the vast and unexpected disruptions of the economy and culture that we're going through right now because of the fast moving Covid-19 pandemic. She said it helped her to realize that we've long been on a fairly comfortable high hill and we're all being forced downhill very suddenly and quickly by this unpredicted threat, which may in a sense be just what we've all needed in order to get off Hill A and down to the base of the Hill B that we need to climb next with new creative energy, an adventure into the unknown that perhaps can take us to a much higher peak if we move forward with wisdom and courage. We've had deeply entrenched habits of assumption, expectation, and operation that we're needing to question and at some points give up or alter, in order to innovate our way through this new massive challenge. But if we follow Odysseus and keep a noble cause at the top of our minds and the bottom of our hearts, we can survive, eventually to thrive, just like that hero, the storm-tossed man.

I've always applied the image and story of Hill A and Hill B to individuals, companies, and departments of companies, as well as to families and other organizations, in order to encourage them to innovate and try new things. And I've never fully anticipated the sort of global disruption that might force a descent from our current high hills on us all, and suddenly. But to use the image and the story of the two hills is to see how this can end up as a transformative thing for the good. The hardship can pay off. And like Odysseus, we may grow in our abilities to cope and create in ways we never could otherwise have imagined. Then once we get home, as he did, or to the top of our new Hill B, we may realize how, through all our struggles along the way, we've attained something that might never have happened in our time. There are things about our sense of purpose and work and community and the good of the world that we need to understand anew, and perhaps we're being schooled in much of it now in ways we could not have anticipated. Meanwhile, like Odysseus, we're being given the chance to be a bit heroic on our own scale in work, at home, and in our communities.

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