

TWO FACES OF THE SAME COIN

The song of life echoes one consistent refrain, "Advance and retreat, advance and retreat, advance and retreat..." And our hearts oft embrace the unspoken hope--perhaps even the fervent prayer--that advances eventually outweigh retreats.

This axiomatic certainty manifests itself early on: life doesn't unfold in smooth increments of either time or experience. "There seems something else in life besides time, something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles...." But what E. M. Forster doesn't mention in this pithy characterization are the notable valleys, the "retreats" that go hand in hand with the notable pinnacles of "advance."

After scouring ads for months, the computer deal I'd been waiting for popped up in a newspaper flyer a few weeks ago. I bought it on the last day to qualify for the substantial mail-in rebate that rendered the whole package attractive. Smiling at this fortuitous advance, I dutifully jotted "send in rebate" on my "to do" list.

Another small advance declared itself soon afterwards when the hours spent helping my son learn nuances of a troublesome subject paid off with a good final exam. But the intensity and distraction of advancing on the college front spawned a retreat on another: I forget to send in my rebate.

Nevertheless, a significant advance excited us just days ago when a friend discovered a replacement for our rickety van. Replacing the ten-year-old vehicle with one half its age (and free from the dents characteristic of our motorized conveyances) boosted our enthusiasm considerably.

Then Monday found us on a pleasant road trip... until the enjoyable routine suddenly collapsed into crisis. Distractions simultaneously sprang on me from nowhere: the cell phone rang (my wife answered it), our son's contact popped out (he goosenecked for a clear view of the mirror), I mistakenly turned into a construction zone (shouts from wife and son and waves from workers dueled for my attention).

And as post-crash anxiety slowly subsides even today, my brain logically argues the impossibility of confusing brake and accelerator--even jumping the curb to smash into a post. But the once-pristine bumper's permanent wrinkle proves otherwise.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Despite the high ground of neutrality to circumstances claimed by the Biblical patriarch Job, I honestly find more delight when the Commander-in-chief orders my advance. But when He commands retreat, grumbling usually invites me to dig in my heels.

Time is the currency of our physical lives, a coin of inestimable worth whose two faces--advance and retreat--seem to turn up randomly. But with its value resting in the integrity of the Giver, we can spend the coin of life with joy, no matter which face we see.