

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Do things happen for a reason?

Featuring Karin Nisenbaum with Stanton Wortham (host) and Scott Seider (commentator)

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Stanton Wortham 00:05

Welcome back for the final episode of our second season of Pulled Up Short. Today, we're very happy to have Karin Nisenbaum of Syracuse University, and as our discussant, Scott Seider from Boston College. Karin is going to speak to us today about whether or not things happen for a reason - the notion of whether things are fated or preordained in some way. It's been a common idea in human history, and she has some provocative ideas about it. Karin, thanks very much.

Karin Nisenbaum 00:33

Thank you so much for the invitation, Stanton. I really look forward to our conversation. When we experience difficult or traumatic events, it can be comforting to think that things happen for a reason. We often construct narratives that help us transform loss into a learning experience or into an opportunity to take a new direction in life. But there's a common understanding of the idea that things happen for a reason that many people find deeply troubling. It often involves some version of the view that a supernatural power (be it God, the fates, or Cosmic Karma) is orchestrating both the events in our life and in the trajectory of the world, so that we get what we deserve, learn what we should learn, or end up where we should end up in life. One reason why many people are so aggressively opposed to this way of understanding the idea that things happen for a reason is that it often involves significant distortion of the facts.

Consider one familiar example: in 1755, a series of earthquakes hit Portugal, the Iberian Peninsula and northwest Africa. It's considered to be one of the deadliest earthquakes in history. One of the main reasons why the casualties were so high was that the earthquake took place on November 1, which is All Saints Day, so a large part of the population was attending Mass at the moment the earthquake struck. The churches, unable to withstand the seismic shock, collapsed, killing thousands of worshippers. This fact made it especially difficult to defend the view that this world is "the best of all possible worlds," and closely supervised by a benevolent deity. Famously, Candide's Voltaire satirizes Leibniz's theodicy and its distorting optimism.

This sort of distortion of the facts in order to uphold the view that things happen for a reason and that there is a divine plan is also what leads Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* to say that he “returns his ticket” to life in this world. Ivan is so outraged by the idea that the suffering of innocent children could somehow be part of a harmonious plan for the world, that he would rather “return his ticket,” as it were. I’m sure that many of us can relate to Ivan’s view. How would we respond if we were asked to accept that COVID happened for a reason, in the sense that it was necessary for a harmonious plan for the world?

So if we don’t think that things happen for a reason, what’s our alternative? Should we then believe that things simply happen randomly or by chance, that some of us are lucky, and some of us are not? That would make us feel completely vulnerable and powerless, because there’s nothing we can do to control what happens by chance.

In this episode, I hope to pull you up short, by proposing a way to think about the idea that things happen for a reason that avoids both horns of this dilemma. I will try to argue that *we* are, in fact, the reason why things befall us. As Heraclitus said, “character is destiny.”

Stanton Wortham 03:38

Thanks, Karin. In some ways, this question of whether or not things happen for a reason seems a little bit old fashioned. It’s like fate. People used to believe that there was destiny, but since I’ve started talking to you about this, I’ve realized that we do this now a lot. There is a very common tendency to think that bad stuff is happening to someone because there’s something about that person, whatever it is about the individual or about the larger order that caused the individual to be prone to that sort of misfortune. Sometimes, good things happen, and we want to take credit for it - either us or some privileged position that we imagine ourselves to have. So it is a common thing to say that something bad happens, and there’s gotta be a reason; or something good happens, and somebody deserved that.

But when you talk about examples, like the tragic earthquake, it does seem callous. It seems wrong. How could we live in a universe in which horrible things like that are happening? Unfortunately, horrible things do happen all the time. So if we believe stuff happens for a reason, we face these real challenges in trying to explain things like the earthquake. Then there’s a sort of macho-contemporary view, a more nihilistic one that says, “Well, of course, they don’t happen for a reason. It’s just contingent. Stuff happens and there is no larger power or order or desert. It’s just that stuff happens one way or the other. It’s a random thing.” That’s a pretty scary way to live, to really believe that bad stuff happens to good people all the time; good things happen to bad people all the time; and nothing bad will ever happen to them. It’s a depressing world to live in, so you’re right. I don’t like either of

those options that you've given us so far; can you please help us figure out how we don't have to make one choice or the other?

Karin Nisenbaum 05:30

I can try. So we can consider an appropriate understanding of the idea that things happen for a reason, which builds on Heraclitus' famous phrase that "character is destiny." This version of the idea that things happen for a reason doesn't involve any distortion of facts.

Let's begin by defining character as a stable way of engaging with the world and other people, which leads to one's life having some kind of predictable pattern. This includes typical patterns of thought, feeling, desire, and action. By understanding character to have this predictability, it can be said that our character is our destiny – we are predisposed to do, think and say certain things rather than others.

Our character can both shape what happens to us in a positive way and our character can be the source of tragedy and misfortune.

For example: I recently listened to an interview with Sarah Hurwitz, the Chief Speechwriter for Hilary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign and then the White House Speechwriter for Barack and Michelle Obama. After the end of the Obama administration, she took some time away from politics and wrote a book about her rediscovery of Judaism titled *Here all Along: Finding Meaning, Spirituality, and a Deeper Connection to Life – in Judaism (After Finally Choosing to Look There)*. During this interview, she was asked why she decided to start learning more about the Jewish tradition, and what she said was a beautiful example of how her character enabled her to turn grief and loss into an opening for new opportunities. She said that she was dating a man; they broke up, she was 36 years old, and she found herself with time that she was wanting to fill. Then she received an email newsletter from the Washington DC Jewish Community Center advertising an Introduction to Judaism class. She went to the class, and one thing led to another. Now, Sarah didn't say that she thought breaking up with this man happened for a reason (that she was meant to become "Judaism's speechwriter – as she has been called). If anything, she suggests the opposite view: in the interview, she says that she *happened* to get the newsletter from the JCC. But we can easily imagine her thinking that providence, or fate, or some karmic force or other higher power somehow orchestrated this series of events in her life, leading up to her enrollment in the Intro. to Judaism class. I would argue that even if she happened to get the newsletter from the JCC advertising the class, there was something about *her*, something about *her character*, that led her to read the newsletter carefully, and be open to the idea of enrolling in a new class and learning about a new topic.

This form of curious openness to the world makes me think of the way Moses is depicted in Exodus. When the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the episode of the burning bush, the text suggests that Moses was an appropriate recipient of revelation because he had a certain character trait: curiosity or open mindedness: “I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up” (Exodus 3: 3). Moses could have simply ignored the awesome sight and continued on his way.

Both Hurwitz and Moses share a certain character trait: a form of curious openness to the world that enables them to be attentive to new opportunities, and to see those opportunities as opportunities *for them*. Sarah didn’t simply ignore the email from the DC JCC; she paid attention, and she was open to learning something new from an Intro to Judaism course. Likewise, Moses turned and looked at the burning bush, he didn’t rush past it because he was too preoccupied with his own business. This made him an appropriate recipient of revelation.

Consider an example that illustrates how character can be the source of tragedy and misfortune. Euripides’ Medea is portrayed as a woman who is habitually disposed to anger. She consistently imagines that other people are wrongfully or inappropriately injuring or harming her, and she responds by trying to get revenge. In the play, her husband Jason takes a new wife, and Medea eventually ends up killing her own two children, because she believes that will be the most hurtful thing she could do to Jason (but of course also to herself). Medea’s character, her tendency to respond in anger to the actions of others, makes her situation much worse than it could have otherwise been.

Stanton Wortham 10:43

I see. So we started with a problem: there is both something appealing about the notion that things happen for a reason, that life is not just random. There’s something appealing about that idea. But there’s also something that feels a little bit dangerous or wrong about it. Similarly, with the notion that things are just random, and stuff happens for no reason at all, there’s also something both appealing and disturbing about it. Neither of the options feels good. You’re offering us a third alternative, saying that we can capture some of the good parts of that notion of things happening for a reason, if we think not about some external force, but character as being what it is that shapes our destiny. So it becomes destiny because of character, not because of something else. There’s something about an individual that endures over time that shapes decisions and thoughts, and it also affects life outcomes.

This is a useful way of thinking about it, trying to reconcile our intuitions about things happening for a reason, but also some aspects being more flexible. There’s also something disturbing about this idea though: if things happen to me consistently because of my character, I can see how that would cause the recurrence of predictable patterns, or make me the kind of person that certain sorts of things would

happen to. But this is worrisome, because if character is destiny in this sense, doesn't this mean I'm kind of stuck? It seems that it might have some of the same flaws of the first position, that stuff happens to us, because it's just fated to happen to us. If we say stuff happens to me, because my character is a certain way, I'm also kind of stuck. That doesn't feel so good either. Does it mean that we can't do anything to shape our own destiny?

Karin Nisenbaum 12:34

Good, good. So, no. I think there are a few things we can do to try to shape our character and in that way control our destiny. For example, I think of Freudian psychoanalysis as a practice that enables us to reflect on our character, discern how it influences our way of engaging with the world (including the ways we perceive, act, and feel), and in doing so try to shape and transform our destiny.

Freud initially thought that psychoanalysis provided a 'talking cure'. The aim of psychoanalysis was to get a patient to talk about a traumatic event, which would in itself be cathartic. Yet he eventually came to think of the aim of psychoanalysis in terms of resolving transference. Resolving transference essentially involves becoming conscious of our habitual way of engaging with the world and with others, and gradually reshaping those patterns in ways that enable us to direct the shape of our own lives. Freud's view was that patients would literally 'repeat' in the analyst's office their habitual way of engaging with others and the world; by repeating their habitual patterns of thought, feeling, and action, the analyst could gradually enable the patient to become more conscious of those patterns, and eventually to try to reshape and control them.

For example, let's imagine that Medea decided to start seeing an analyst. Because anger is one of her main character traits, we can imagine that she might at some point become angry with her analyst. Let's say that he had to cancel one of their sessions because he was ill. But Medea is disposed to perceive the actions of others as intended to wrongfully injure or harm her; and she is disposed to take revenge. So she might imagine that her analyst is not in fact ill, but lying to her. She might imagine that he simply decided to go play golf when she most needed him; and she might go to the golf course where she knows he plays and try to find him.... Hopefully the analyst wouldn't have the sad fate of Medea's children, and in their next meeting could try to help Medea see how she is repeating a pattern of thought and action that leads to tragedy.

Stanton Wortham 15:01

This concept of transference is a powerful one - the notion that we all have patterns that we tend to repeat, usually without recognizing it. We confront new situations with emotional and intellectual packages of reactions that come from earlier experience that we transfer unknowingly on to new

experiences – this is something that I find myself doing, and as I observe others, I see them doing it often as well. It seems like a very powerful explanation for a significant chunk of human behavior. So you're saying that character, conceptualized in this way, can explain why things happen for a reason, and in that sense, I have a certain kind of outcome in my life. That outcome results in part from these habitual patterns that have developed in me over time, where I react similarly to certain kinds of people or certain sorts of situations. It also is useful to have you explain how patterns of transference, while they're robust, difficult to change, and often complex, can be engaged. There is some hope at being able to alter your habitual patterns of reaction, at least in some respects. So character isn't exactly destiny. Character influences the way things are likely to turn out for you. But there is an opportunity to try to redirect or modify those habitual kinds of patterns, with an intervention like psychoanalysis or some other kind of similar practice.

You've given us a useful way of thinking about destiny: the notion that things happen for a reason is 1) fated, or 2) randomness, or 3) now a third alternative of our characters shaping what happens to us, but us having some input in modifying those outcomes, at least some of the time. Can you talk a little bit about the implications this has, or how things shape our lives and how we in the audience might live a little bit differently given this insight?

Karin Nisenbaum 17:15

Sure. So there are a few things that I would like to say in that regard. So first, we might wonder whether there are any standards for good or bad characters, given the claim that we can shape our characters, which in turn shape our destiny. Is there a standard which should guide how we shape our character?

Freud didn't really think that there were standards for good or bad characters; but he did think that the characters of his patients were in various different ways preventing them from living the lives they wanted to be able to live. So a good character for him would be one that enables us to live the sort of life that we want to live, to flourish and to accomplish the things that we want to accomplish, and to form the relationships that we want to form.

Aristotle by contrast had a clear sense of the criteria for good or bad characters. He thought that good character traits were virtues, or means, between two extremes. So for example, a virtuous person is brave or courageous, which is the mean between cowardice and rashness; or my favorite virtue, wit, which is as Aristotle describes it, the mean between buffoonery and boorishness; or a virtuous person is generous, which is a mean between wastefulness and stinginess and so on.

I tend to think about this question, whether there are standards for good or bad characters, in a more pluralistic way. If we think that different individuals have something distinctive that leads them to have certain extreme character traits, that can be a good thing, as long as we can see how different individuals complement each other to form a beautiful and harmonious whole. For example, imagine an ideal family or group of friends in which one person is extremely compassionate, another is extremely just, another is extremely courageous, another extremely generous. I'm not sure if it would be better for each person to try to reach the perfect mean. Perhaps each person could instead recognize and value the very different and indispensable roles that they each play in the family or group of friends, and how their extreme character traits enable them to play those roles well.

Another thing that I'd like to mention is that today, we've spent most of the episode discussing character as destiny. But of course, character isn't the only thing that influences human behavior. Specific situations and certain social, economic, or political structures influence our behavior as well in profound ways. If we're thinking about the ways in which character is destiny, then we also need to think about the ways in which our character is shaped by certain social, economic or political structures, and what possibility there is to try to have an impact on those structures and therefore on our character as well.

Lastly, I'd like to submit that not only individual people have characters or habitual ways of engaging with the world, but that nation-states have characters as well. Perhaps the practice of psychoanalysis can provide a model for the sorts of conversations that would need to take place between the leaders of different nation-states, in order to solve long-standing conflicts. These sorts of conversations would require understanding how the history of each nation state has shaped in profound ways its present pattern of engaging with other nation states. These are some of the implications that I think my idea that character is destiny has.

Stanton Wortham 21:01

That's great. There is some element of destiny, that things *do* happen for a reason, to some extent with respect to character, and how people's characters lead them to repeat certain sorts of patterns that tend towards certain kinds of outcomes. If we acknowledge that people have some control over this, that through psychoanalysis or some other practice, they might be able to change their destiny, change their character, move in a different direction, then that raises the normative question of, "Well, what direction should they be moving in?" An interesting insight you just gave us there was that it's not just a question at the individual level. The unit of analysis for answering the normative question of what direction we should encourage people's characters to develop is not just a question of what the ideal individual character looks like, but it might be a question of what social system or social context the

individual is in. As you point out, different kinds of individuals might be needed to work together in some larger system. That's an interesting notion: the idea that we might imagine a sort of psychoanalysis or character development process for a collective and not just for an individual. Another interesting idea is the fact that nations might have characters, and thus, nations might have destinies. Those destinies, as you've argued, might be partly malleable through some sort of a process that allows them to change or modify that national character in a particular direction. So you've shared several very interesting ideas here about the notion of destiny and how it is an attractive notion, but also a disturbing notion. You working with the notion of character as an alternative way of thinking about it helps us avoid some of those unpleasant consequences, and maybe get the best of both worlds. So thanks very much, Karin. Now I'd like to bring in Scott and ask him if he's got a few questions for you.

Scott Seider 23:12

Hello, and thank you. Thank you so much, Karin, for such an interesting conversation, which gave me a lot to think about. I have a couple questions for you, really friendly questions just aimed at thinking through a couple of the points you raised.

So my first question: at the very end of the conversation, you very briefly noted that you perceive character to be destiny. But of course, there are all sorts of institutions and structures that influence our lives as well. That was something I was really thinking a lot about as I was listening to your conversation with Stanton. I found myself wondering whether there might be something dangerous about a way of thinking that privileges individual behavior, over the impact of systems and institutions in our lives. In a sense, it seemed you might be sort of nudging a poor person, for instance, to ask themselves, "What character traits do I have that keep me poor?" Rather than asking a question like, "Why is the minimum wage so low, and what could be done to change that?" Your comment right at the end made it clear to me that you are thinking about this relationship between individual qualities and systems, but I'd love to ask you to say a little bit more about that.

Karin Nisenbaum 24:26

Right. Thanks, Scott. The reason why I mentioned that point is I think, to my mind, that's the most obvious objection to the view that I'm presenting here. The way that I'm thinking about this is in some ways different from the way that Freud thought about it, but I think some more contemporary Freudian analysts include aspects of what I'll say now. That is: these sorts of economic, social, and political factors can also affect our character. For example, I've just been reading work by young scholars - philosophers working on philosophy of feminism or philosophy of race - and looking at the ways in which certain political or economic structures can have an impact on our affective constitution.

For example, ways in which people can become kind of affectively numb because of certain disadvantages that they have, or habitually disposed to think that they won't achieve certain things or that they won't have meaningful relationships, or things like that. So I think that there's a really interesting way in which psychoanalysis can also show us how our particular class, race, or different economic structures can affect our character as well.

For example, this is something that I'm just learning about: W.E.B. DuBois thought that people who have experienced oppression can sometimes not be aware of the ways in which those forms of oppression affect them - their emotions or their habitual ways of engaging with others. We need art and social bonds that help us become aware of that and perhaps become activists in different ways.

I think what Stanton said also shows how the way that I'm thinking about this isn't as focused on the individual, in the way that Freudian psychoanalysis perhaps is. That is: to try to think about the sort of role that we play in different social settings, like in a family, in a group of friends, in a department, and we might even think about nations in that way. What role do nations play in a certain kind of global configuration? So we're not just focusing on the way that our character shapes our own life, but the way that our characters shape the lives of others because of the role that we play in these bigger configurations.

Scott Seider 27:02

Let me ask a second question that's sort of in that same ballpark, just because I do think this is an important place for thinking about this piece of your conversation. This comes from my perspective as a research psychologist. One thing I fully agree with is that from the outset is that as human beings, we have a real desire *not* to see our lives as buffeted by randomness. Whether or not that's the case, we have a desire for that *not* to be the case.

There's a number of psychological theories that suggest that in response to that desire, individuals actually overestimate the amount of control they have over events in their lives. One such theory is attribution theory, which suggests that we overestimate the extent to which *we* control events in our lives, but we also overestimate the extent to which *other* people control events in their lives. So we tend to see other people... as in the case of a billionaire having deserved their billions, in the case of a poor person having deserved their circumstances. That recognition of attribution theory (and there's a few others, like just world theory, systems justification theory, you get the idea) made me feel like your argument is nudging folks towards a greater sense of control and efficacy. Sometimes I wonder whether maybe we should be nudging folks in the opposite direction, to not overestimate the control they possess in their lives. I'm curious as to what you think about that.

Karin Nisenbaum 28:40

Yeah, that's a great question. I was also thinking about that, as I was thinking about this episode. I, myself, go in both directions. Let me say a few words about that. One book that I find really helpful to think about this issue is a book by Martha Nussbaum *Anger and Forgiveness*. She claims that many people feel anger, because it's easier, in a way, to feel anger. The way she understands anger is that there's somebody to blame for the loss that you experienced, right? Then, you can try to get revenge and somehow make things go back to normal, or something like that, or have some kind of control over the loss that you experienced. And as you said, what would it be like, if instead of responding in anger (which is ultimately a desire to have some sort of control over the loss that you experienced), what would happen if instead, we just were sad and experienced grief and mourning over the loss that we experienced? I think that there is also a lot to be said about that. Sometimes, we try to have so much control over the things that happened to us, and perhaps the appropriate response is just grief, sadness, and maybe some forms of work of art.

For example, Aristotle thought that that was one of the functions of tragedy, that you watch tragedies, not to see how people have control over their lives, but to see how their lives end up in tragedy. You just experience sadness with other people, you experience pity, and that's cathartic, in some ways, just experiencing that with other people. I think that art can do that: represent loss, represent grief in certain ways, and that's somehow comforting to experience that with other people.

So I think that that's the other direction in which I would go. I think there's a side of me that wants to go the route of control and shaping our character; and there's another side of me that wants to go the route of acknowledging that loss, grief, and mourning are part of human life. Art can be very powerful in just enabling us to experience those things together with other people and bring comfort and relief in those ways. But thanks for the question. That's great.

Scott Seider 31:00

Thank you. Let me ask just one more question, which goes in a different direction. It comes out of my thinking about the idea of character. Your conversation with Stanton was really based on this idea of character as destiny. And something that I was thinking about, as I was listening to the conversation, was: I often push back on a conception of character as stable. Let me explain what I mean, and then I'm curious if this influences your thinking. I'm curious if my conception of character influences the way you think about it in one way or the other. I don't have a clear conclusion here, but I think that we have another tendency that we, as human beings, imagine a character quality (generosity or perseverance) and imagine that to be a stable quality that an individual possesses. Whereas I would say

that the research suggests that quality is much more context-specific. So to take me as an example, to take perseverance as an example. I have an enormous amount of perseverance when it comes to editing a paper and solving a statistical problem. I have an incredibly low level of perseverance when it comes to solving a problem when my car's not working. Sometimes, as human beings, we have a tendency to think: "On a scale of 1 to 10, this person's an 8 when it comes to perseverance." In my mind, it's actually much, much, much more context-specific.

So when I think of your example, for instance, of Sarah Hurwitz looking at that letter from the JCC about an opportunity to learn more about Judaism and you're attributing her response to curiosity, my guess is that there were probably other pieces of mail that day, one from Home Depot, let's say, that didn't trigger her curiosity. So I guess if my conception of character is a useful one (it may not be), it would be a much more context-specific quality, and I'm curious if there are any implications for the idea of character as destiny.

Karin Nisenbaum

Thanks. That's a great question. I don't think that the view of character that I'm trying to propose here, that character is destiny, needs to go hand in hand with the idea that character is stable and fixed, in some sense. In some ways, I really balk at that idea, because I think that there are ways of using that idea in different forms of psychotherapy to say, "Oh, there are certain types of personalities or things like that, and we need to identify what kind of personality we are." I think that's just a very controlling attitude, to try to reduce people to certain personality types or things like that. I think that people are much more complex, and as you're saying, that their character changes in different ways.

So, one way in which I think about this is, perhaps you do as well, is that different situations but also different relationships (bring out different aspects of our character). I'll give a personal example: I think many people in my family (meaning my father, sisters, mother) think of me as a very serious person, and one of the things that I discovered that I really liked about myself is that with certain people, I really love to be very funny. It's one of the things that I most like to be. I think that was just because it was something about the constellation of my family that didn't bring that side out of me, and so it's nice to discover how different relationships bring out different aspects of your character.

Perhaps I don't think that your character is completely malleable, but I do think that there are certain ways in which different situations or different relationships can bring out different aspects of your character and perhaps psychoanalysis can help you see that, can help you see how this situation is bringing out certain character traits. Are those character traits that you want to embrace and that you think are helping you live the sort of life that you want to live? And if not, how can you change your

situation and your relationships, so they enable you to bring out different aspects of your character that you would rather embrace.

Scott Seider 35:22

Well, thank you very much. It's really interesting. I really appreciate you considering these questions and for me at least, it really deepens my thinking about the conversation I had a chance to listen to.

Karin Nisenbaum 35:32

Thanks so much for your questions; they were really great. I enjoyed our conversation.

Stanton Wortham 35:37

Thank you, Karin. Thank you, Scott. We appreciate you bringing these ideas forward and it has certainly pulled us up short and given us a lot to think about. Thanks, everyone for being here. Check out the American Anthropological Association website at americananthro.org. Please subscribe to Pulled Up Short wherever you get your podcasts, and follow us on Twitter @PulledUpShort.