Humankind has perpetually been plagued by and molded by conflict. Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known to the English-speaking world as Horace, once declared: “Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant.” Horace, the leading Roman lyric poet during the time of Augustus, proposed that an individual’s full potential is unlocked only in the face of great struggle. Horace’s claim has stood the test of time and has been supported throughout history. Granted, a felicitous few achieve success with little opposition; nonetheless, the vast majority of people discover newfound strengths and abilities out of necessity, and these same people would lack the mentality to excel without a sense of urgency driving them.

A person’s character is defined by numerous traits, but one that often manifests itself alongside adversity is perseverance. When a person is handed things in life, he becomes groomed to expect someone else to solve problems for him. When this individual is faced with a challenge, he seldom strives to overcome the odds, expecting the solution to be thrust upon him. Strong moral character is difficult to develop without any hardship. Conversely, diligence and tenacity are often evoked after trying times. Nearly everyone who is knowledgeable of the game of basketball regards Michael Jordan as one of the best, if not the best, players in NBA history. But the determination that shaped Jordan’s game came as a result of struggle and failure. Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. This setback could have been the end of his basketball days. Jordan could have accepted his inferiority, but instead he responded as a true champion would. He let the experience fuel his efforts to improve and be better. Jordan worked at his game every day despite having been told he wasn’t good enough, and it is this steadfastness that propelled him to stardom and to change basketball forever. Jordan best summed up Horace’s claim when he remarked on his career: "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." Onerous conditions can invigorate our responses in a manner that prosperity cannot.

Adversity takes on many forms; perhaps, its most inspiring is that of danger. The Greek defense at the Battle of Thermopylae demonstrates just how powerful a motive adversity can be. In the battle, King Leonidas of Sparta led an army of merely a few thousand men against an estimated 100,000 Persian invaders. After holding Thermopylae for two full days of battle, the Greeks were betrayed by a local when he alerted the Immortals (Persian soldiers) to a deadly flanking route. Leonidas commanded 298 Spartans—not 300—as well as 1200 other Greeks, in what is widely regarded in one of the most famous last stands in history. The small force of Greeks dispensed an estimated 20,000 Persian Immortals. Their impetus to succeed at any cost stemmed from the constant threat of death. Indeed the Greeks ultimately fell, but their unyielding courage in the face of defeat speaks volumes about their character. Had the two armies been evenly matched, the Spartans’ superior military fortitude and tactic may not have materialized as strongly. In all likelihood, the Greeks’ zeal on the battlefield was amplified by the treacherous circumstances in which they found themselves. Likewise, the moral fibers of America’s firefighters are products of their continued resistance to peril. Firefighters place themselves in danger on a regular basis to ensure the safety of others. They don’t find themselves in harm’s way by chance, nor do they find themselves there just once. Firefighters constantly risk their wellbeing by venturing into adversity’s dominion because they are willing to do what is right, no matter the cost. The acts of the intrepid FDNY first responders who rushed into the burning Twin Towers as its occupants rushed out are demonstrative of their spirits. Even in death, they would not compromise on their heroic disposition. This strength of character, as are all of the supreme feats accomplished in the line of duty by “our bravest,” is elicited by adversity. Firefighters continue to battle nature’s most destructive element, for they are not willing to stand by as others suffer and because with each life saved, each disaster averted, they have bettered themselves and those around them. Among other influences, danger can induce greatness, whether in physical achievement or ethical resolve.

Adverse scenarios have the beneficial side effect of augmenting our physical and moral capabilities. Without these tests, we cannot reach our complete capacity as human beings. Whether it presents itself in the form of failure or struggle, danger or death, adversity brings about favorable transformations, in ability and virtue. Adversity may be the most effective catalyst in energizing our self-enhancement.