

What I Learned Falling to Earth: Habits of Resilient People

A sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, February 18, 2018

Meditation

“Benediction for the Heavy Heart” – by Mason Bolton.

Good morning. I missed your “good”
because a plane, because a truck, because
a gun, because a cop, because a government,
because a people suffering, because too many
people suffering, because war, because famine,
because some mornings it is so hard
to rise, to wake, to be a self.

There is a pause here. There is a deliberate
cessation. I want a cessation to the noise
in my head, to the ache in the collective
heart of this world. When I was young
this seemed possible. When I was young
how hope seemed to spring eternal.

I want to write about butterflies, about
the cracked edges of tree bark pressing
like a holy mother into palms. I want to write
about the joy of children’s cries, about birth,
about the arch of your smile, how I could
lose myself in the corners of your
sweet and grinning mouth. This you is
you [hearing] this. I want for your joy,
want to lose myself in you. I want your

mornings “good,” your evenings “good,”
all the late-nights and sunrises and afternoons
and moments pressed against the ticking
glass of your life “good.”

Breathe. For yourself. For each other. Let
us breathe in when others cannot. When we
can do nothing else. Let us stretch ourselves
open to embrace our friends, to extend
our bodies open to anyone willing to meet us,
or even to meet those we think may not. Let us
hold each other for this moment. For this
blink of human existence

Reading

Excerpt from *Perseverance* - by Margaret Wheatley

“Perseverance is a choice. It’s not a simple, one-time choice, it’s a daily one. There’s never a final decision. Our first “yes”—filled with energy and enthusiasm—brought us here, but it’s of no use as the waters rise and the turbulence increases. By the time we’re surrounded by obstacles and opposition, by aggression and mean-spiritedness, our initial choice has no meaning (if we can even remember that optimistic moment). This is as it should be. Having to make a choice every day keeps us alert and present. Do I have the resources, internal and external, to keep going? Can I deal with what’s in front of me right now? Do I have any patience left? Is there a way through this mess? These critical questions require a momentary pause, a little reflection. Rather than just striking out or being reactive to a bad day, we offer ourselves freedom. Do I continue or do I give up? Even a brief pause creates the space for freedom. We’re not trapped by circumstances or fatigue. We give ourselves a moment to look as clearly as we can at the current situation. And then we make a conscious choice. Every day.”

Sermon Reflection

This is the third part of our worship series this month on the question “What does it mean to be a people of perseverance?” This morning I want to focus in on that quality of resiliency that is a necessary component of perseverance.

The word resilience is defined as "**the power or ability to return to the original form or position after being bent**, compressed or stretched, the "ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like." Think of the visual metaphor of those little toys introduced by Hasbro back in

the 70's - **Weebles**. Inside each roly-poly egg-shape is a weight at the bottom center. When the Weeble is tipped over, that weight lifts and the force of gravity causes the toy to return to its upright position. It wobbles a little bit before it comes to a standstill. I imagine quite a few of you remember the catch-phrase used to advertise these toys: "Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down."

Something similar occurs with people. Like Weebles, resilient people wobble but they don't fall down. Like the Weeble, you could say a resilient person has a low center of gravity. They have a large base of support and high stability.

This is certainly true of our ability to be physically resilient. Our physical center of gravity is the point in the body where our weight is evenly distributed. For most people that's our lower abdomen. We can improve our physical resiliency by training the muscles along the whole torso.

But resilience isn't just a matter of physics. It's also a matter of psychology and spirituality.

The Rev. Sharon Dittmar reminds us that:

We are the ones we have been waiting for. We teach this in our Unitarian Universalist classrooms, but this is not a message widely shared in schools, homes, and workplaces across the United States. It is not a lesson I learned as a child, rather, I inferred it the hard way, through decades of trial, error, failure and resurrection. I was going, am going to fall and fail often. It is probably not personal, and even if it is, the opinions of other people are none of my business. Look up, pick myself up, find something beautiful, start all over again.

The Elders of the Hopi Nation tell us "Here is a river now flowing very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid, who will try to hold on to the shore. They are being torn apart and will suffer greatly. Know that the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore. Push off into the middle of the river, and keep our heads above water. And I say see who is there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally, least of all ourselves, for the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt."

We should post this in rooms across the United States because as an adult I now understand that the river is flowing very fast. My parents, in their efforts to shelter and care for me, did not explain the river of life and its deep and wily currents. So when I hit the river of life I took everything personally. It was my fault I was not chosen. I was to blame if a project failed. If everything fell apart I was cursed.

And the Elders say "Take nothing personally, least of all ourselves, for the moment we do, our spiritual growth and journey come to a halt." Failure is not personal. Loss is not personal. It is a fact of life. **How we respond is a choice**, a power each person retains during the chaos of loss and suffering.

Which is why "we are the ones we have been waiting for." It is within our power to face each day, good or bad. The word resilience comes from Latin and means "to jump again."

In her article "How to Bounce Back from Failure: 7 Habits of Highly Resilient People," Carolyn Gregoire notes the qualities that make people resilient:

- 1) They experience both positive and negative emotions
- 2) They're realistically optimistic
- 3) They "reject rejection" because rejection steals joy. As writer Alex Pattakos explains "don't become a prisoner of your own thoughts."
- 4) They build strong support systems
- 5) They notice and appreciate the little, positive things to create a "positivity ratio"
- 6) They seek out opportunities for growth and learning, even major challenges
- 7) They're endlessly grateful

If you are like me, you go through this list and find qualities that come naturally to you, and qualities that really challenge you.

In the New Yorker article "How People Learn to Become Resilient," (February 11, 2016)

Maria Konnikova explains what we have learned from two generations of research on resilience in children. According to Konnikova, it is hard to tell who is resilient in this room.

There is no test you could take to determine your resilience. As Konnikova explains "Whether you can be said to have it or not largely depends not on any particular psychological test **but on the way your life unfolds**. If you are lucky enough to never experience any sort of adversity, we won't know how resilient you are. **It's only when you're faced with obstacles, stress . . . that resilience or the lack of it, emerges.**

And yet, researchers found that not all children labeled as "at risk" responded the same way.

A researcher named Emily Werner discovered three qualities that predicted resilience. Are you ready for the first one? It is a good one. **Luck**. Yes, plain old random, not something anyone can control, luck. For example, is there at least one loving caregiver in your life? Enough food on the table? A stable home life? When you broke the law the police did not catch you?

The second and third qualities have to do with innate personality: (2) "children who meet the world on their own terms," and (3) Children who have an "internal locus of control."

Resilient children are independent and social and see themselves as masters/mistresses of their own fate with an ability to self-modulate. This can somewhat be taught with manageable challenges (not by helicoptering, parents), but mostly these are personality characteristics.

One of the people I have met in my work had a dreadful childhood, but he says that even as a child he said to himself, "**I refuse to let that be my life.**" Think of this audacity, not enough food, ripped clothes, poor education, father in prison, drugs in the home - and all along silently saying to himself "I refuse to let that be my life." Today he is successful, stable, happy - job, career, family, friends, expendable income. He is the poster child for Emily Werner's research on at risk children who succeed through resilience.

[...]

You will be glad to know that although researchers have learned that some people are born more resilient, **resilience can be learned and acquired over time**, by even those who believe themselves unlikely to be able to bear whatever burden they carry. [...]

One of the most poignant pieces of information I learned in researching resilience is that resilience can not only be acquired, but it can be lost. A person, even a child, who is resilient, with luck and an innate disposition, **can be overwhelmed by too many stressors or losses**. As Konnikova explains, everyone has a "breaking point." In addition, people can become less resilient by worrying about anything, or **considering what is negative over and over again**.

This is the power of negative thinking. Food for thought. Realistic optimism plays a part in resilience. [...]

Source: <http://www.firstuu.com/sermons/2016/03/mar-06-2016.pdf>

In a reflection titled "Resilience: Be More Like Water, Less Like Ice," Sandra Fees writes that:

It turns out that cultivating resiliency [also] has a lot to do with belief and habits of mind, which we can also call spiritual practices. In a recent interview on NPR, Andrew Zolli, co-author of the book ***Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back***, says some of the things we can do to bolster resilience are "intriguingly about your belief system and ... about your habits of mind."

One of the most effective ways to cultivate resiliency is through spiritual practice – what Zolli calls *habits of mind*. Brain studies of actively meditating Buddhist monks reveal the benefits of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness practices. Similar results have been found when studying the brain activity of nuns praying. These practices help people learn to better regulate their emotions.

In recent years, we have seen an increased cultural yinterest in mindfulness practices in the medical field, among spiritual people generally, and in our UU communities. I find that devotional yoga, meditation, and prayer offer me ways to develop positive habits of mind. They teach me to be still and to connect with my own interior life. I retain my practice during low-stress and high-stress times. I need to cultivate inner strength and stress management during the calmest times so that when a tragedy or even minor day to day irritations arise, I am better able to adapt.

When I think about becoming more resilient, I think about having the ability to move with life's changes. I think of that well-known saying about trees bending with the wind. It's a very familiar proverb from the Mandarin Chinese. It teaches that: "The tree that does not bend with the wind will be broken by the wind." I meditate so I can bend with life, rather than be shattered by it.

Our beliefs matter too. One belief that bolsters resiliency is that the world is meaningful. It includes being committed to finding a meaningful purpose. [...] And believing that life is

meaningful and purposeful does not require or reject a belief in God or a higher power. It does not require a set way of understanding God or the divine.

[...]

Another focus of resilient individuals is on making the world a better place. **Those who have successfully weathered change** and received the help and support of others recognize how essential our relationships and communities are to our own ability to survive. [...]

Helping others is good for the world and also improves our own well-being. So those who want to improve their ability to bounce back, might do well to lend a helping hand. Volunteer [within this fellowship and/or the wider community.]

It probably won't surprise many of you to learn that **believing we can influence our surroundings and outcomes** is another key to human resiliency. This is a belief in human agency and that we have some control over our own choices and outcomes. In other words, we are participants in life, not pawns. We don't have control over everything, but we do have a voice and a hand in creating the world we want for ourselves and others.

Related to this is the belief that we learn and grow from both positive and negative experiences. Albert Einstein said it this way, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Those who are resilient find the opportunities. Because none of our lives are entirely without pain or stress, our success and happiness depend not on avoiding problems so much as learning to move with them.

Personal experience is one of the primary sources of our UU faith. We use our own stories of success and failure to help us better understand ourselves and the world. It is through our personal experiences that we are opened to the source of life. Our painful experiences as well as our joyful ones hold the potential to open us to life.

Taoism teaches that: "**change is the essence of life and going with the flow is the best way to manage things.**" In the words of Lao Tzu: "the rigid and inflexible will surely fail while the soft and flowing will prevail."

From poet Mark Nepo, we learn what this means when confronting physical pain. Nepo describes the searing pain after having a rib removed. At first, he tried to deal with it by resisting and tensing against the pain. Then slowly he gave way and rather than remaining rigid and tense, which increased his suffering, he imagined himself becoming more flexible, more like water, less like ice. As he relaxed with the pain, he was able to lessen it. He opened to the experience. He says, "By opening fully to our own experience, we can feel and see the resilience of life around us."

Our religious tradition offers us resources and tools that can bolster our resiliency. This includes our principles and sources of faith as well as our embrace of spiritual practices [...] that foster mindfulness. Embracing and cultivating these values and habits of mind can help us become more like Weebles. We can lower our center of gravity and build our core. We're all going to wobble from time to time. But we can learn how to get back up, how to be more open to life, how to be more like water and less like ice.

Source: <http://www.uuberks.org/sermon/resilience>

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

Music for Reflection

“Weather the Storm” – by Benjamin Scheuer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2fJl9BMY>

Closing Words

- by Maureen Killoran

No matter how weak or how frightened we may feel, we each have gifts that can make a difference in the world. In this coming week, may you do at least one thing to support the broken; to welcome the stranger; to celebrate what is worthy; to do the work of justice and love.

Be strong.

Be connected.

Each day, act — so you may be a little more whole.