

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

Andrew Frantz, contract minister

February 23, 2020

Reflections on Resilience

Invitation for bouncy ball ritual

In a few moments, a basket will come through the sanctuary and everyone is invited to take a rubber bouncy ball. Let this bouncy ball represent your personal resilience. What allows you to bounce back when life is challenging?

Along with the bouncy balls, we will pass out permanent markers, and the invitation is this: write on your bouncy ball a word or two that represents your resilience.

It might be a person's name. For example, I could write on my bouncy ball "Dave," because my friend Dave is always there for me and my connection with him reminds me of my power—all the good things within me.

Or it might be a thing you do. I could write on my bouncy ball "jogging," because when I go jogging it is super good for my mind and my body, and it helps me to have perspective about anything that's going on in my life.

Or the word you write on your bouncy ball might be a part of your personality. For example, I could write "calmness" on my bouncy ball because I am usually calm even when things are crazy, and this is part of my resilience.

Shane Koyczan / bullying

I also want to share some other reflections about resilience, adding to the sharing that Kendra offered this morning, and the poem that Andrea just read, and the two families that shared their thoughts on resilience today. One of them is the work of Shane Koyczan. He is quoted in your order of service, and this is an excerpt from a longer spoken word poem called "To This Day." I first learned about this poem about five years ago when I was teaching in a charter school in Cleveland, and a fourth grader in my classroom gave me this quote. If you have seven minutes and you have access to YouTube, I suggest looking at the whole video of this poem.¹

The poem is about the experience of being bullied as kid and then surviving that and overcoming it. One thing that he repeats in the poem is: *They were wrong*. All the other kids who said mean things about you in school: *They were wrong*. And the poem is about having the strength and resilience inside of yourself to overcome being bullied and to believe in yourself. Here's the quotation that hangs on the bulletin board in my office and is included in your order of service today:

"If you can't see anything beautiful about yourself, get a better mirror. Look a little closer. Stare a little longer. Because there's something inside you that told you to keep trying when everyone told you to quit."

Historical example: Maya Angelou

I also have two historical examples to share today that demonstrate resilience. The first one is centered on Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou's birthday is the day that Martin Luther King was killed. She turned 40 on that day—April 4, 1968. Here is what the writer Kenny Wiley says about this:

Maya Angelou turned forty on April 4, 1968. She had planned a big party in Harlem, with many of the day's black intellectual elite among the guests. History had other ideas; Dr. King's assassination sent Angelou into a weeks-long depression.²

So this example of resilience is about Maya Angelou getting through this time in her life, and according to Kenny Wiley there were two things that helped her: laughter and ancestral guidance. The laughter part came through a friend, James Baldwin, who Maya Angelou calls Jimmy. Here's what Maya Angelou says about that time:

There was very little serious conversation. The times were so solemn and the daily news so somber that we snatched mirth from unlikely places and gave servings of it to one another with both hands...I told Jimmy I was so glad to laugh. Jimmy said, "We survived slavery. . . . You know how we survived? We put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales. We danced surviving in Congo Square in New Orleans and put it in our pots when we cooked pinto beans. . . . [W]e knew, if we wanted to survive, we had better lift our own spirits. So we laughed whenever we got the chance."³

This is about personal resilience, the resilience of Maya Angelou; and it's about friends helping you through hard times, in this case James Baldwin helping Maya Angelou. And it's about another level of resilience entirely: the cultural and racial level. In this quotation, James Baldwin is talking about the resilience of the African American people through music and dance and cooking. "We put surviving into our poems and into our songs," he says.

Historical example: Seneca

My other historical example of resilience is much older. Instead of coming from the 1960's, it comes from ancient Rome. This is the story of the Roman philosopher Seneca, and I'm quoting here from the Book of Life:

The ancient Roman philosopher Seneca had great success running what we would now call a venture capital firm. He owned beautiful villas and magnificent furniture. But he made a habit of regularly sleeping on the floor of an outhouse and eating only stale bread and drinking lukewarm water. He was reminding himself that it wouldn't ever be so bad to lose pretty much everything – so as to free himself of nagging worries of catastrophe. The realization gave him great confidence. He never worried so much about what might happen if a deal went wrong because, at the very worst, he'd only be back on the kitchen floor next to the dog basket, which was – in the scheme of things – OK.⁴

In other words, this successful man regularly practiced imagining losing everything. Not just imagining it, but acting it out in a real way. This is a twist on resilience that I had not anticipated. I invite you to think about what this might look like for you: what if you lost something important to you, how would you carry on? Evidently Seneca thought that if he kept this in the forefront of his mind, he would be ready when misfortune struck him.

It seems to me that this philosophy is akin to the Buddhist teaching on non-attachment. Buddhists advocate not being attached to material things, including wealth...but also not being attached to feelings or to physical health. Everything is passing. When we let go of attachment, we can be present in this moment and at peace. The extreme extension of that in Buddhism is to not be attached to life itself, so that when death comes, we are ready.

The paradox of bouncing back vs. moving through

I'm going to end today with one more quotation about resilience, and while I share this we will pass out the bouncy balls and the Sharpies. Ironically, this quote is about how we can't bounce back. I'm comfortable with paradoxes and with embracing opposites, so it's in that spirit that I share this quotation from Eric Greitens:

Life's reality is that we cannot bounce back. We cannot bounce back because we cannot go back in time to the people we used to be. The parent who loses a child never bounces back. The nineteen-year-old who sails for war is gone forever, even if he returns. You know that there is no bouncing back. There is only moving through... What happens to us becomes a part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives.⁵

I still love the bouncy ball as a metaphor for resilience. It is useful to think about bouncing back. At the same time, I honor what Eric Greitens says here, that we are not bouncing back but moving on. Always changing into something new and better through our resilience.

Either way you think about it, may you know resilience within yourself. May your resilience be strengthened by your loved ones, and by this community gathered here. And may we all use our resilience to improve the world outside of these walls, spreading love to everyone. May it be so.

¹ To This Day Project, Shane Koyczan. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltun92DfnPY>

² Wiley, Kenny. "Nights can be tough." Article published in UU World magazine, fall 2015, retrieved online at <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/nights-can-be-tough>

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Book of Life, chapter 3. Retrieved online at <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/on-resilience/>

⁵ Greitens, Eric. Resilience: hard won wisdom for living a better life. Boston: Mariner Books, 2015.