

## Resilience

Here are four viewpoints on resilience:

Often the only African American person in the room, Tiffany Griffin found herself fighting to get others to consider her perspective: that resilience was partly a function of one's context, a skill honed by years of navigating systemic adversity. This view often clashed, she says, with the American notion that being poor is the result of poor choices. (Finn Cohen, "Tiffany Griffin on America's Narrow View of Africa," "The Sun," September 2024, pg.5)

Part of resilience is deciding to make yourself miserable over something that matters or deciding to make yourself miserable over something that doesn't matter. (Elizabeth Edwards)

Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems. (Gever Tully)

Resilience is very different than being numb. Resilience means you experience, you feel, you fail, you hurt. You fall. But you keep going. (Yasmin Mogahed)

I pointed to those four examples of thoughts about resilience, selections from the hundreds that bloom in the literature of the internet, because we need resilience to cope with this era's challenges. The news seems increasingly, persistently bleak; that is, until tomorrow arrives with worse news. My response has been to consider the nature of resilience, and a couple of real-life examples of my developing some. I will illustrate what it means that we must be tested and stretched to develop resilience and what can we do for each other to develop resilience.

When the latest large hurricane hit Florida, there were numerous references in the media and by Governor DeSantis to environmental and governmental resilience. Resilience in that context means "bounce back, rebounding, to a previous state of being, recovering from adverse events." The larger meaning of resilience can be "a system or person maintaining core values and positive affect in the face of dramatically changed circumstances."

For example, that is why we make children go to school. They should be challenged with new ideas just enough to stretch their minds but not overwhelm. However, they don't just learn in classes. Only half of the school day is spent in actual teaching and learning. A huge amount of every school day is spent in motivating and punishing students, feeding them, making them run around and play games they will never play in adulthood, managing conflicts, or just getting them from one class to another. The unofficial—but also important—curriculum in schools is about coping with teachers who are usually dedicated and concerned but are sometimes obtuse or sadistically arbitrary. Students have to realistically and resiliently figure out what an authority figure or rule is really about and how to cope. This unofficial curriculum teaches students to take the blows and adapt, and to rebound from their fellow students' emotional and physical assaults. Hopefully, these challenges for students to “bounce back” are moderate enough that it strengthens people, but that is not always the case.

“Bouncing “back” is an illusion anyway. Once we've been painfully impacted by a damaging, and/or frightening event, there is no real going back. Our context has changed, and we have been changed. We must go forward. Some people are remarkably adept at moving on. Dr. Ellen Langer—a prolific author, researcher, and professor of psychology at Harvard—spoke of when her house burned down. It was still smoldering when her insurance agent showed up and Langer talked matter-of-factly with him about future plans and next steps. The insurance agent interrupted her, asking “Are you alright? I've talked with lots of people after disasters and you are the only one who is perfectly composed.” She replied, “that house was the past, it is time to move forward.” She also said, “where the mind goes, the body goes, so point your mind in the right direction.” In sum, don't bounce **back**, bounce **forward**. Now, Ellen Langer is smart but this blithe indifference to loss comes too close to Norman Vincent Peale's “Power of Positive Thinking” for me to give it **absolute** credibility.

I was trained to do psychotherapy at the Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute, a licensed psychiatric outpatient clinic that Rev. Dr. Peale created after a young woman tried to apply his thinking to her life and felt she had failed, so she killed herself. Faced with the proof of his flawed thinking, Peale created a clinic next-

door to his church in 1938, when psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were quite controversial. Maybe Langer and Peale can simply refocus on the future and move on, but most people have to first take stock of what was dearly loved or neglected and lost.

Part of resilience is accepting that you are in pain, that your hurt, sad, or uncomfortable feelings are running you around. Peale created an institution to provide therapists to complete his message with people available to hear the hurt fear, and dire imaginings empathetically. Therapists brought some perspective to clients that balanced anxiety and depression with strengths and joys, recognizing that it is often how you view the situation-- rather than the situation itself--that is keeping you stuck in feeling sad or anxious.

Long ago, I was a teacher and supervisor at that same Blanton-Peale post-graduate training institute from which I had previously graduated. I taught the course for students writing their final paper for graduation, a massive summation of the students' views on human development, the process of therapy, and a case study. I met with supervisees individually for an hour each week for a year or two. I liked mentoring. I saw supervisees gradually listen better and respond more sensitively, so I felt rewarded by effectiveness. But then, the tide of student opinion turned toward a competing theory of psychotherapy, and the top administrator was replaced. I "retired."

Leaving hit me hard emotionally. I missed the refreshing variety of supervision, and I felt restless. I missed being an effective mentor and rich interactions about important tasks. Leaving had given me space for more clients, but I felt deprived.

As adversities go, this was moderate. My income and physical well-being were never at stake. I continued to thrive. Unfortunately, events soon forced me into accepting the presidency of my agency. A cascade of negative events followed. My mother died about that time, the economy crashed, and health insurance companies increased their attacks on psychotherapists. I sometimes emotionally froze in my tracks with accumulated grief, anxiety about cutting the agency's budget or the hassle of finding cheaper liability insurance. What I

learned, however, was why the previous president had often said, “There’s always somethin’” because there **was indeed** always some new challenge but none of the events were, by themselves, deal-breakers. I gained a wider perspective, a greater—if still imperfect—inner calm through meeting the challenges. I located experts in various fields who could advise me on specific problems and learned that if I just meditated and waited judiciously sometimes problems solved themselves. I adjusted my self-expectations when the stock market cratered, and money was very tight. When some other agencies went broke at that time, I soothed myself by deciding it was good enough for my agency to simply survive and hire a couple of newly laid off clinicians. Some people stepped forward to fill a gap in my functioning. My self-management was strengthened through meeting challenges in a larger variety of ways. I experienced and understood my administrative role differently than when I started.

As Maria Konnikova said,

Do you conceptualize an event as traumatic, or as an opportunity to learn and grow? Events are not traumatic until we experience them as traumatic . . . Every frightening event, no matter how negative it might seem from the sidelines can be traumatic or not to the person experiencing it. The sudden death of a friend might be sad, but if you can find a way to construe that event as filled with meaning—perhaps it leads to a greater awareness of a certain disease, say, or closer ties with the community, then it need not be traumatic. (Maria Konnikova, “How People Learn to Become Resilient”)

To that I reply, “Yes, but” because some events do overwhelm us. We might feel that our world has fragmented. But we attend memorial services so sadness about the death of a friend strengthens our ties to a community and comforts us through confirming some transcendent meaning. But later—maybe a few days, a few weeks—we might feel very depressed, and we could take months or years to dig our way even part way out. Any one of us might never be fully free of feelings from that loss. This is not a shameful emotional flaw. Some events—like assault, war, and illness—are so massively harmful that it is as if our brains are locked into short-circuits. Treatment of PTSD is still very primitive. The U.S. Dept. of Defense funded over fifty research projects for the treatment of war trauma and all of

them worked—a little. It is both true and false that trauma is a matter of perspective. It is merely an ideal to say, with Maria Konnikova:

“that teaching people to reframe an event in positive terms when the initial response is negative, or in a less emotional way when the initial response is emotionally “hot”—changes how they experience and react to it. You can train people to better regulate their emotions, and the training seems to have lasting effects.” (Konnikova)

As hopeful as training to regulate emotions has been, it can also generate harsh self-criticism by traumatized people, as in: “Why can’t I calm down? Why am I still afraid?” An approach that is merely individualized also isolates people. Full-blast trauma lessens over time from reflection, therapy, and close connections with others, but maybe doesn’t disappear. It is not a personal fault that sometimes you just want to retreat, withdraw, and sleep because of trauma. However, courage means we also challenge ourselves to know our feelings and start—again and again—doing at least some little things that give us more confidence or pleasure.

If you could already do everything yourself, you wouldn’t need this sermon. You wouldn’t even be here or listening on Zoom. Resilience is facilitated by relationships. As the Rev. Scott Taylor noted:

Forget solo act; think community choir! We survive our pain by having the strength to tell others about it. We find the courage to make our way through the dark only when we sense we are not alone. Internal and individual grit gets us only so far; empathy, assurance and love from others gets us the rest of the way. Resilience has everything to do with the water within which we swim and the web of connections that surround us. Resilient people arise from resilient relationships! (Scott Taylor, “What Does It Mean to Be A People of Resilience?”)

We, as a community, have been traumatized by the loss of 25 Old Jackson Avenue. We have faced the many feelings that Hurricane Ida stimulated, and we may still. That is occasionally OK, but can be an emotional trap because it misses the new opportunities and new ways we can relate to others who are here because of who we are now and can be in the future. We will share with each other the challenges we experience and how we try to stretch our repertoire of coping skills. Sharing that is received with concern and empathy heals us.

Sadness, hurt, loss and resentment will still need to be explained and received. We are here for each other. But loss is not all there is for us. We light candles of concern and **joy** in person so that everyone can empathize for each other sadly and gladly. Every other congregation I have visited does candles of joy and concern isolated off to one side, written down in a book or on little scraps of paper that then the minister and/or a committee reads and reacts to. Our “candles” are both direct to the congregation and recorded by the BMOW for the pastoral care committee to respond to. This congregation truly is special in the high degree of mutual concern and celebration you express to each other personally.

Which leads me to yet another guardrail on struggling with challenges, this one from Alfie Kohn:

Not everything is worth doing, let alone doing for extended periods. Often it just doesn't make sense to continue with a problem that resists solution or persist at a task that no longer provides satisfaction. Hence the proverbial Law of Holes: When you're in one, stop digging. Gritty people sometimes exhibit what psychologists call “nonproductive persistence. . . . those who can disengage from unattainable goals enjoy better well-being and experience fewer symptoms of everyday illness.” (Alfie Kohn, “True Grit: True to What?”)

The takeaway I want to leave you with is that accepting that you have been hurt is good for you and others, so long as you—and we--don't stop with that. It means you have not stifled your real feelings. You have a basis for empathy for others. You value some things with real clarity of mind and commitment. When what has been hurt is of major value, then that is when we would best stand and struggle. Resilience is not whether we struggle to thrive, we will always struggle with adversity and grow stronger when we can. Resilience is furthered by **flexible** struggle to keep our values but change **how** we cope. We gave up a flooded community garden at 25 Old Jackson. But we are now both in-person and on Zoom. We are newly adaptive. We experience ourselves as more resilient and understand that buildings do not define us. Changed circumstances led us to changed expression for our values.

When a writer for a magazine article about our flood asked me how I responded to the damage, I said, "It energized me! I got to work making things better." She looked at me blankly, but I was coming from experiencing floods every two or three years while growing up on a farm in Nebraska. Spring rains would fall on streams and rivers that were ice-choked, so water flooded our farm on Platte River bottomland. Some learning is transferable like that. Our community is so very valuable to me that energy spent safeguarding it is well worthwhile. I am speaking not about things, which are only significant as they preserve and extend our mission. Our mission of kindness to each other and the world is supremely valuable. Not really "by the way:" while I have been caretaking Sarita after her hip replacement on Monday, you helped with useful advice, concern and food. It was all much appreciated. It all adds up to feeling good about who we are. There is no end to the grit I will pour into preserving and extending our mission. You have already joined me, and each other, in bouncing forward resiliently. You have chosen, on a daily basis, to reach out to each other, to help each other, and to advance our values of seeking truth and meaning. This resilience is about experiencing and understanding ourselves as stronger together, more flexible together, and more loving—together. So be it.