

The Power of Resiliency – or How to Get up Again (and again and again)

By Terri Willingham, Presented December 2019 at Spirit of Life UU

“Enthusiasm is common. Endurance is rare.” — Angela Duckworth

“Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems.” — Gever Tulley

“Grief and resilience live together.” — Michelle Obama, *Becoming*

As we head into the New Year, at the start of our 21st century Roaring Twenties, few skills are as in demand as resiliency. At its most fundamental definition, resiliency is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties and challenges. It also means durability and elasticity, traits we all need more than ever.

I’ve got considerable experience in being repeatedly knocked down and getting back up again, as I’m sure all of you do as well. But I think failure is a form of exercise. I need to get more physical exercise, obviously, but I do believe that Failure Squats are one of the best core-strengthening character-building exercises available to the human spirit!

A great article in the *New Yorker* a few years ago, by Maria Konnokova, took a deep dive into the nuances of resiliency. “Resilience,” said the author, “presents a

challenge for psychologists. 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, and other environmental threats that resilience, or the lack of it, emerges: Do you succumb or do you surmount?"

That's a question that has always fascinated me. Years ago, I read an article that described the way different people undergoing almost identical negative situations handle them. The writer observed that some people use adversity as a crutch, while others use it as a ladder. I've never forgotten that, and whenever I've been tempted to lean and hobble, I've tried to pull myself together and climb instead.

These are not new concepts or ideas we're talking about here. Viktor Frankel's *Man's Search for Meaning*, written in 1946, is all about finding meaning and a reason to go on when all seems lost.

Norman Garmezy, a developmental psychologist and clinician at the University of Minnesota, was among the first to look beyond the trauma of adversity, to the factors that help some people overcome it and prosper – into resiliency, with

studies on children in the 1960s. And childhood is, in fact, where the roots of our resiliency often begin.

[my story here – abandoned at 4, but not cognizant of the challenge until later – going back and forth, seeing differences between how people handle things (perspective), etc]

One of the central elements of resilience, researcher George Bonanno has found, is perception: “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,” Bonanno told me, in December. “To call something a ‘traumatic event’ belies that fact.” He has coined a different term: PTE, or potentially traumatic event, which he argues is more accurate. The theory is straightforward. Every frightening event, no matter how negative it might seem from the sidelines, has the potential to be traumatic or not to the person experiencing it. (Bonanno focusses on acute negative events, where we may be seriously harmed; others who study resilience, including Garmezy and Werner, look more broadly.) Take something as terrible as the surprising death of a close friend: you might be sad, but if you can find a way to construe that event as filled with meaning—perhaps it leads to greater awareness of a certain disease, say, or to closer ties with the

community—then it may not be seen as a trauma. (Indeed, Werner found that resilient individuals were far more likely to report having sources of spiritual and religious support than those who weren't.) The experience isn't inherent in the event; it resides in the event's psychological construal." In other words, while not always the case, we often have a choice in how to interpret or process an experience that can be traumatic, as something transcendent or otherwise pivotal.

We've all had these experiences – loss, physical , real, imagined – and had to choose, consciously or not, what direction that experience would take us.

[My story: Old nonprofit tale, other failed partnerships – do you keep on trusting? Get more careful as you trust?]

The good news is that positive construal can be taught. "We can make ourselves more or less vulnerable by how we think about things," Bonanno said. In research at Columbia, the neuroscientist Kevin Ochsner has shown that teaching people to think of stimuli in different ways—to reframe them 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 the stimulus. You

can train people to better regulate their emotions, and the training seems to have lasting effects.

Similar work has been done with explanatory styles—the techniques we use to explain events. I’ve written before about the research of Martin Seligman, the University of Pennsylvania psychologist who pioneered much of the field of positive psychology: Seligman found that training people to change their explanatory styles from internal to external (“Bad events aren’t my fault”), from global to specific (“This is one narrow thing rather than a massive indication that something is wrong with my life”), and from permanent to impermanent (“I can change the situation, rather than assuming it’s fixed”) made them more psychologically successful and less prone to depression.

Unfortunately, the opposite may also be true. “We can become less resilient, or less likely to be resilient,” Bonanno says. “We can create or exaggerate stressors very easily in our own minds. That’s the danger of the human condition.” Human beings are capable of worry and rumination: we can take a minor thing, blow it up in our heads, run through it over and over, and drive ourselves crazy until we feel like that minor thing is the biggest thing that ever happened. In a sense, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. Frame adversity as a challenge, and you become more flexible

and able to deal with it, move on, learn from it, and grow. Focus on it, frame it as a threat, and a potentially traumatic event becomes an enduring problem; you become more inflexible, and more likely to be negatively affected.

I don't think it's much of a stretch to consider how the Internet contributes to how we view different events, based on who is doing the explaining and how events are presented. Here, a serious measure of honest evaluation is important. Who is doing the story telling and what do they want you to feel, experience, or do as a result – and is that something you actually need to feel, experience or do? Do you buy into the sales job of hopelessness, or despondency? We have a new reality with what's going on the world around us – climate change, incivility, declining lifespans. We can succumb to what can look like the dawn of a new dark age, at times. Or we can adapt.

“Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you've lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that's good.” —

Elizabeth Edwards

“My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon.” — Mizuta Masahide (17th century Japanese poet and samurai) . That’s an extreme case of the positive spin, but you get the point.

In our high speed culture, it's easy to forget that it actually takes time to do things, time to achieve things, time, ironically, to change things - especially in a world that seems to change so quickly. Time is a big part of resiliency, understanding that what is happening right now is not likely to be happening always, that over time, things change again, and so we must get up again to be ready, to love, to help, to succeed at being alive.

“Do not judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” Said Nelson Mandela, the epitome of resilience.

It may not all work out in the end, but it’s not about the end. It’s about everything in between and you won’t find the joy if you don’t persevere through the sorrow, or see the view unless you get to the top of the next mountain.

[AMRoc Story - AMRoC is the most amazing thing I’ve ever done, but I wouldn’t be there if I hadn’t kept going, in spite of everything that seemed to conspire against it. Same for my marriage, come to think of it, and my writing, and my kids...]

So when you raise your glass on New Year's, give a toast to tenacity, yours and those you love, and keep going, because there's so much still to see, learn and do!