

“Resilience--More Than Just Enduring”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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The theme for this month has been resilience. At some point in each of our lives we have all exhibited resilience. I feel confident in making such a blanket assertion because I am certain every one of us has experienced significant difficulties at some point in our lives. I am equally confident that in some of those difficult situations or experiences we found a way to endure. In others, we didn't just endure, we were resilient. You may recall instances from your past when you were glad you were able to simply endure one or more of the difficult times you faced. And I would guess you may also recall difficult situations or experiences when you did much more than just endure, you were resilient. These were times when you came out of the experience stronger, wiser, healthier, happier or maybe even financially better off. You might even have a sense of some specific trait, tactic, tool or talent that you drew on that made it possible to exhibit resilience instead of just endurance.

The people who study resilience tell us that there are numerous such traits, tactics, tools and talents that, when used at the right time and to the appropriate degree, determine how resilient we will be in a given situation. They claim that resilience is made up of various components. In a sense, resilience is like a cake. To make a cake you need a number of ingredients, ingredients such as flour, sugar, eggs, butter, oil or margarine, a liquid, some type of leavening ingredient, heat, and for some folks, chocolate is an absolute necessity. If you don't have all of the proper ingredients, or if you have added too much or too little of any ingredient, your cake just doesn't come out well. It might be gooey to the point that it sticks to the top of your mouth. Or it might come out so dry that you need a full glass of water or milk to wash down even a few bites of it. Researchers say the same is true when it comes to being resilient. Rick Hanson, the author of our reading this morning, has spent a considerable amount of time looking into the subject of resilience and he has written a book about what he believes its most common and essential ingredients or elements are.

In his book, fittingly titled *Resilience*, Hanson claims that all people have three basic needs. He lists these as safety, satisfaction and connection. He then asserts that there are four major ways of meeting these needs. These are recognizing, resourcing, regulating and relating. Working from this framework, he goes on to state that there is one strength for each of the three needs. Multiply this by the four major ways of meeting these needs and you come up with twelve strengths that are associated with personal resilience. Hanson dedicates an entire chapter to each one of the twelve strengths he identifies.

Since I only have about twenty minutes for this sermon, I will focus my attention on just four of these strengths. These are compassion, gratitude, calm and generosity. I selected these particular strengths, one from each of the four ways of meeting needs, because each one has a strong connection to religious teachings and practices from the major religions of the world. I find it interesting that in the reading we heard earlier, Hanson only mentioned psychology and medicine. He neglected to mention religion or spirituality. Part of what makes this interesting is that Hanson has devoted significant

attention and energy to Buddhist teachings and practices. This tells me that he recognizes that religion can play an important role in the health and wellbeing of a person. Clearly sciences such as modern medicine and psychology provide many benefits to our lives. When it comes to resilience however, these sciences are just beginning to discover the important contributions to human resilience that some religious practices have been providing for centuries.

The first of the strengths I just mentioned is compassion. If you know anything about Buddhism, you know that Buddhist teachings consider compassion to be an important virtue. In Theravada Buddhism compassion is one of the “four divine abodes” along with loving kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. And in Mahayana Buddhism, compassion is considered to be one of two qualities, the other being enlightened wisdom, that are essential for one who seeks to discover the path to enlightenment. Jainism is another religious tradition that teaches the importance of compassion. Ahimsa, meaning both compassion and “not to injure,” is a cardinal virtue as well as an important tenet of Jainism. Both Buddhism and Jainism share common roots and date back to at least the 4th century BCE and possibly even earlier.

Here is a bit of what Hanson writes regarding the benefits of compassion.

Compassion is a warmhearted sensitivity to suffering—from subtle mental or physical discomfort to agonizing pain—along with the desire to help if you can. Giving compassion lowers stress and calms your body. Receiving compassion makes you stronger: more able to take a breath, find your footing, and keep on going.

In other words, becoming skilled in the area of compassion increases a person’s ability to deal with difficult situations.

The second strength I want to focus on is gratitude. A common synonym for gratitude is thankfulness. In the Christian tradition there are numerous specific types of prayers. One specific type of prayer that is mentioned in the Bible is referred to as “prayers of thanksgiving.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 it is written, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...” I have found that prayer isn’t something that gets talked about in most Unitarian Universalist services. I have a hunch that is because many UU’s don’t have a regular prayer practice, which makes sense to me for a number of reasons. The particular scripture passage I just cited offers some examples of reasons a person might have resistance to prayer. It seems to me that the first two aspects of this passage are excessive. “Rejoice always.” Really? “Pray without ceasing.” What? When do I sleep? But finding a way to give thanks in all circumstances invites me to find something, anything, positive in my life. Being able to find something positive to hold onto in times of distress can make a world of difference in a person’s life.

Hanson writes:

Gratitude and other positive emotions have many important benefits. They support physical health by strengthening the immune system and protecting the cardiovascular system. They help us recover from loss and trauma. They widen

the perceptual field and help us see the big picture and the opportunities in it; they encourage ambition. And they connect people together.

So whether you have a prayer practice or not, finding a way to acknowledge gratitude and thankfulness in your day to day life will increase your resilience. And if you share that gratitude and thankfulness with others, you will likely make someone else's day brighter.

The next strength on my list is calm. This strength is clearly exemplified in the teachings about Christ's life, especially the last days of his life. Those of you who have spent any length of time in or learning about the Christian faith tradition likely know about the accounts of what led up to Christ's crucifixion. In the weeks leading up to Easter it is common in many Christian churches to hear how Jesus remained calm when taken captive at Gethsemane. He remained calm when he was questioned by the high priest. He remained calm when Pilate sentenced him to death. And as the story is written, he even remained calm in the last moments of his mortal life. Being calm is also significant in the Buddhist tradition. Buddhism, as I mentioned earlier, teaches that equanimity, the quality of remaining calm and undisturbed, is one of the "four divine abodes."

Let's hear what Hanson has to say about one emotion, namely fear, that can challenge our ability to feel calm:

It's important not to suppress fear or overlook what it's trying to tell you. Reasonable concerns are your friend, keeping you out of potentially dangerous situations. But being consumed, invaded, and compromised by fear doesn't make you safer. If anything, the distractions of excessive fear and its wear and tear on the body actually undermine your safety. A little fear goes a long way, and it doesn't have to penetrate your core and push you into the red zone. One of my favorite sayings from the Buddha is "Painful feelings arose, but they did not invade my mind and remain." Use fear; don't let it use you.

Developing a practice that allows you to feel calm, whether in the face of fear or in the grips of pain, has a positive influence on both the quality and the longevity of a person's life. In some cases, remaining calm in difficult situations can even be a life saver in the moment.

The final strength I want to mention today is generosity. The three Abrahamic faith traditions hold a common value when it comes to generosity, specifically generosity that relates to charity. In Judaism giving to the poor is an obligation, a duty that cannot be forsaken even by those who are themselves in need. This is referred to in the Jewish faith as Tzedakah. There are Jewish scholars who assert that this practice is not as much about generosity as it is about righteousness, justice or fairness. That may be very true. I am not sure, however, that generosity, and by that I mean the willingness to give or share, isn't at least a small part of this practice. Likewise in the Islamic faith tradition, Zakat, is the setting aside of a portion of one's income to provide for the needs of the poor. And in the Christian Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke there is a story of a wealthy man asking Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus replied, "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have riches in

heaven...” As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t focus much if any attention on heaven. We do, however, believe in and practice being generous. In my time as your minister I have been witness to your generosity of time, talent, energy and financial resources to one another, to this Fellowship, to the greater Bozeman community and beyond. I want to take this opportunity to practice one of the strengths I mentioned previously, namely gratitude. I want to express my gratitude for all you give and do to make the community we are all a part of and the world we all call home a better place to live.

The final chapter of Hanson’s book is titled “Generosity.” Here is how the second paragraph of that chapter begins.

At first glance, generosity may not seem like a mental resource, but it strengthens you with a sense of the fullness that’s already inside you while also connecting you with other people. Generosity to them is a gift to you along the way, giving you even more to offer in a positive cycle.

If you reflect on the religious practices relating to generosity that I just mentioned, and you contemplate the statement I just read by Hanson, I believe you will find that generosity is the gift that keeps on giving. It is the gift that all of us need to give and to receive in order to build and maintain resilience in our own lives as well as in the lives of others.

Prior to today I have written entire sermons on each of these four strengths, compassion, gratitude, calm and generosity. My intention today has been to touch only lightly on each of these in order for us to focus our attention not on any one of them in particular, but on how each plays an important role in one’s ability to be resilient. I have done this because I firmly believe that being resilient involves numerous strengths and resources. Some of those strengths and resources are integral to an array of religious traditions, including our own. As we depart from this service may we carry with us a growing sense of how, in this religious community, we foster resilience within our own lives as well as the lives of others. My hope is that as we gain more awareness of the elements that foster resilience, we will recognize that resilience is so much more than just enduring. And may we also recognize that we have the power to build and strengthen resilience. Here is one final quote from the book. “You learn to be calmer or more compassionate the same way you learn anything else: through repeated practice.” So as we go forth, may we all seek to practice compassion, gratitude, calm and generosity. And as we do so, may we experience resilience flowing through every cell in our bodies.

So may it be.