



What I Learned Falling to Earth: Habits of Resilient People

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Reading:

Here is a river flowing now 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.
The time of the lone wolf is over.
Gather yourselves.
Banish the word struggle from your attitude
and vocabulary.

All that we do now must be done

in a sacred manner and in celebration.
For we are the ones we have been waiting for.

-- ELDERS OF THE HOPI NATION

Sermon

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 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 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.

In preparation for this sermon I asked you to send me your stories of resilience, defined as "the power or ability to return to the original form, position after being bent, compressed or stretched, the "ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like."

Thank you to the many people who shared their honest and painful experiences of resilience. Your stories emphasized how much resilience is learned through suffering. Three of you sent me stories of resilience from childhood. One of you wrote

A painful experience in my life was my parent's divorce resulting in my father moving overseas when I was 11 years old . . . For various reasons we rarely saw him again, and losing him was a huge loss. We really missed him . . . I learned self-reliance because my Mother was busy and money was tight . . . Furthermore, we learned to have empathy for others who are lonely, sad, dealing with pain. Lastly, I am grateful to my father for being so loving, because I'll always have that feeling of being loved as a child."

In this story of pain and loss I hear luck, one person, a father, who loved this child. I also hear a child, now an adult, who broadened this story so that it did not remain personal. This

person was social and morphed personal hardship into empathy for the many people who struggle. She is also endlessly grateful.

Another member wrote me about a shocking experience in a strict religious school. As a teenager who asked questions in class, this person was brought to the Assistant Principal who promptly smacked him so hard across the mouth that blood spurted everywhere. In a moment of shock and pain, this person neither cried nor got angry, but calmly insisted as he had from the start that he did not understand what he had done wrong. This response brought the Assistant Principal up short.

Later, this member was able to neutrally reach out to the teacher who reported him to the Assistant Principal and gave the teacher pertinent information on the class topic. This response brought the teacher up short. This story reminded me of #2 and #3, a child who meets the world on his/her own terms, and a child who has an internal locus of control. In a humiliating and painful moment, facing the baddest disciplinarian, this child kept his cool and stayed true to himself, almost ignoring the system in which he found himself. He rejected rejection.

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. Some of your stories indicate great resilience, even in childhood, and others learned resilience in the river of life.

One of you wrote to me about the shocking day your childhood home burned down. This person was 11 years old, sick at the time, and very small. A fire broke out when only she and her 4 year old brother were home. In the midst of considerable fear and chaos, this ill eleven year old searched the other floors of the home for any family members (there were none), shut the door to the basement where the fire started, and then in what she to this day considers an unlikely feat of strength, removed a heavy ladder from the front door so they could escape.

The more powerful part of this remarkable story is that she is convinced that one of the adults in the family intentionally set the fire, perhaps to kill her and her brother. She has every reason to believe this is true. Some of us grow up in homes with very sick adults, and are subjected to abuse from the day of our birth. She wrote "I learned that sometimes bad things can happen to you that are deliberately caused by other people. For a whole set of reasons, those people are often not punished, or even called out for the bad things they did or tried to do." Amen, sister. Amen. Sometimes we have dreadful luck and it is astonishing that we survive. Interestingly, this person learned not to take it personally (a trait in resilience). She wrote "if someone is consistently hurting me, I don't need to strike back. I need to get away from them. I can't change them; I can only change me." She rejected rejection and developed an internal locus of control.

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. One of you wrote to share how important it is to take "one small step that is healthy or positive and build on it." That is realistic optimism.

Two of you wrote to me about the devastation of a divorce. One of you wrote

The marriage ended when my husband moved out of our home to be with a woman I considered a good friend. I had been abandoned and betrayed by both husband and friends,
I was devastated and felt devastated, worthless, and scared. I cried and dry-heaved daily .
..
Despite my pain and fears I was able to make a good decision . . . I chose to look at myself, my relationships, and my life. In other words I went into analysis . . I was forced to see that we all have weaknesses and don't always live our lives honorably, not even me.

I particularly like this story because it reminds me of me. I do not consider myself one of those amazing resilient children. I learned resilience through suffering and getting back up again as an adult, just like this person. Like her I struggled to reject rejection (instead taking things personally and feeling worthless). But like this person, I have slow but steady gumption and personal courage - not necessarily the kind that leads to acts of heroism, but the kind that leads to therapists and self-awareness. This person built, or re-built a strong support system and sought an opportunity for growth and learning. She concluded by writing "My choice to face myself and deal with my crisis turned my devastating divorce into the most meaningful opportunity in my life." She is endlessly grateful.

Another one of you wrote also about a divorce

Despite my best efforts in the last year of my first marriage to convince my first wife to stay, she decided to divorce me. Some days it was an attractive story that she was the perpetrator and I was the victim . . . But I knew that wasn't true. I had to take a good hard look at myself and evaluate my contributions to the failed marriage. I found I had a lot of garbage to take out. I also became convinced if I wanted to attract a better woman, I had to become a better man.

Resilience through the hardest kind of growth and learning - examination of the self.

One of you wrote to me about the time your husband lost his job, the only source of income, while there were three small children at home. The job loss was shocking, no warning, no severance, no money. Panic mounted for months until this young mother just realized it was beyond her control, turned it over to God and let go. "The elders say we must let go of the shore."

Two others of you wrote to me about times in your life when several things fell apart all at once. One of you was trying to fake it, pretend you were OK, as this person wrote "I, as a person from a staunch, independent German background, had been taught that with enough intellect and strength I could handle anything." As she soon learned, this was not the case. At some point she took a stress test which unmasked the obvious, she was sinking in the

river. As she wrote:

I had been going to a counselor and finally was honest with her about the depth of my despair. As I remember I mentioned suicide the next time I saw her and she carefully didn't flinch. I also let my friends know and asked for help. I allowed for emotions. I would burst into tears while driving and allow this, sometimes pulling over until I could see the road again. Over and over again I would recall times in my life in which I had successfully come back from difficult times. Finally I went about my life experiencing one day at a time and allowing the grief and despair and also joy and hope wash through when it would come. Finally the days grew brighter and I knew I was a different person than I had been.

This person was honest about negative and positive emotions, found a support system and over time created a positivity ratio by noticing the good things. She broke the cycle of worry and moved into realistic optimism.

The last person who wrote to me had a story like Job, a righteous man in the Bible who is smote with trouble by God (of all beings) for no good reason. I will call her Jobette. Within a five-year period, Jobette went through a divorce, financial trouble, cancer, three major surgeries - one that led to infertility, the death of a friend, loss of a friend, and significant concern about a child. She had years of painful suffering. She wrote "I had very little capacity for resilience at the time... In the midst of my outrage about being DEEPLY wronged, it wasn't at all easy to hear my psychologist say that one of my biggest obstacles was my penchant for getting "very fixed on a desired outcome." Jobette, for all her pain was also able to apply a great sense of humor to her problems. Humor must figure in the resiliency charts. Over time she felt she experienced a personal Renaissance and gratitude for what she learned.

Jobette wrote about the secondary gain of learning resilience later in life, "Over the years I have continued to dip into that resilience-lesson pool as subsequent challenges have come my way." Once you learn the art of resilience, you can use it again and again in the river of life as it ebbs and flows. This is why we do not need to save our children from their suffering. Researcher Brene Brown says that "children are hardwired to struggle." More than that, our children will not learn resilience if we rush in to save them from everything.

Suffering and loss is part of life, not a sign of personal wrong-doing or failure (you can leave your closet Calvinist self at the door). We can't always pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. This is not a moral or character flaw. This is life. And when it happens we will need to let go of the shore, which will tear us apart, and move to the middle of the river. Look around and see who is there with you. Celebrate. Take nothing personally, least of all yourself, so that you may continue to grow.

I leave you with three quotes found on Jobette's refrigerator to this day:

“Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.”

- Corrie ten Boom

“Breathing in, I calm my body, breathing out I smile. Dwelling in the present moment I

know this is a wonderful moment” - Thich Nhat Hahn

“I finally figured out the only reason to be alive is to enjoy it.” - Rita Mae Brown

You are the one you have been waiting for. If you are struggling, you can do this.

May it always be so.