

Faith and Resiliency

By David Baum, PhD, DMin

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Think of a recent challenge you have faced. Illness to you or family members, death of a loved one, job loss, and/or the recent economy. Make it hard. No shortage of trauma out there. We are all members of "the scar clan". I want you to keep thinking about your challenge. Keep it "present". Keep it current. And keep asking yourself the question, "This is all well and good what David is saying, but what does this have to do with me?"

I am a student of change. I am fascinated by it. I have been known to watch ice cubes melt in glasses on a hot summer day. And in twenty years of studying and teaching on this subject this is what I've learned.

Change is not *a* natural state but *the* natural state. It is the nature of the universe to be in constant motion. We are either in expansion or contraction, living or dying, in love or in fear, breathing in or breathing out...but it is rarely one of stasis. Instead it is the nature of all things to be about physical and spiritual transformation. Stephen Hawkins, the great astrophysicist once said, "You can't ask, 'Do I want to change?' You can only ask, 'What does it mean to me?' and 'What am I going to do in response?'"

It is the response that defines who we are and the response that makes change either meaningful or not, an act of courage or not, a strengthening moment or not, and ultimately spiritual or not.

My grandmother used to say, "Life is filled with difficulty, pain, heartache, struggle and change. If it wasn't they wouldn't have called it 'life'. They would have given it some other name." Or as Joseph Campbell said, "If you can see your life perfectly laid out in your mind, like steps, A, B, C, D, in great clarity, then you know it's not your life. It's someone else's."

The bibles, Old and New, are filled with people who were defined in their story not just by faith but by their ability to respond to change with a quality I believe is essential for helping us to cope with the challenges of life—*resiliency*!

In the wake of even the most horrifying experiences, research shows only a small percentage of adults become chronically troubled. More commonly, people rebound—or even eventually thrive. More than half of all people who have struggled with terrible trauma say it ultimately changed them for the better. Their refrain is something like, "I wish it hadn't happened, but I'm a better person for it."

I have never been a big believer in the phrase, "It's all good". Sometimes it is so not good. But I do believe that we have the ability to make the best of what we have been given. We call this "resiliency".

We often think of resiliency as the ability to bounce back, but when it comes to its *spiritual* nature, resiliency is more than just

recovery. Instead it's about *transformation*. Thus instead of bouncing back when we are fully resilient we bounce *forward*. Those who weather adversity with resilience are living proof of one of the paradoxes of happiness: We need more than just pleasure to live the best possible life. Those we consider wise have been tempered by adversity, and their lives positively altered by painful and even traumatic events.

The contemporary poet Bo Lazloff said, "One thing you can begin taking for granted is that every person you meet who seems to have courage, dignity, compassion and humility has experienced failure and weakness and shame."

What then defines resiliency?

A friend of mine, Jerry White, in 1984 while hiking in the Golan Heights stepped on a landmine and blew off his right leg. Ten years later, he went on to found the Landmine Survivors Network, a Nobel Prize winning organization dedicated to landmine eradication and victim support around the world. Jerry has taught me these five key steps based on what he has experienced and seen. He is one of the most resilient people I know.

Step One: "Face Facts" about your suffering and loss, no matter how brutal or cruel. This means to see what is truly so, without inflation or denial. Resiliency does not mean we are always optimistic. It means we greet what comes to our gate with clarity and direct, unvarnished honesty. Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was held and tortured by the Vietcong for eight years during the Vietnam War was once asked, "Who didn't make it out of the camps?"

"Oh", he responded. "That's easy. It was the optimists. They were the ones who said, 'We were going to be out of the camp by Christmas. And then it was going to be Easter and then the Fourth of July and then it was Christmas again.' You know. I think they all died of a broken heart."

This first essential step means, the painful honesty of wrestling with the truth of what is so. To remember as Helen Keller said, "When one door closes, another opens. But we often look so long and so regretfully at the closed door that we do not notice the one which has opened for us."

These moments of truth are rarely epiphanies. Generally, we get only a whisper - a faint urge. That's it. That's the call. It's up to us to do the work of discovery, to connect it to an answer that is larger than the challenge or crisis we are in. "It's not what we know that gets us in trouble", Will Rodgers said. "It's what we think we know that's not true that causes our pain."

Step Two: "Choose Life". In every crisis there is an inevitable choice point that eventually comes. This means *willing* yourself into

the future and not the unchangeable past. I use the word "willing" because this is often very difficult in struggle or hardship. It is a threshold point, a decision, a commitment to life. But the truth is we choose life, every day, in every moment and every breath and--it is a choice. It is our defining moment and what propels us forward.

Last year I was in a Shiva temple in southern India. Coming down a long set of incense laden stairs I came across the poorest human I had ever seen (and that is saying something in India). He was somewhere between sixty and eighty--hard to tell given his condition—and wearing a filthy red loin cloth which barely covered his emaciated body. He was also a leper and so had parts of his hands, feet and face missing. His only possession was a dirty wooden begging bowl. I struggled to hold my gaze on his matted hair, yellow eyes and dirt-covered face. I was filled with pity for this poor human being.

He looked at me for a few seconds with piercing eyes, and quietly asked, "Are you happy?"

Rather than give a perfunctory response, something called in me to be as honest as possible. Maybe it was the incense, maybe the prayers or the place but I looked him directly in the eyes, paused and honestly said, "Yes. Today I am very happy."

He then smiled through a mostly toothless mouth and blissfully beamed, "Me too!"

In every moment of adversity or crisis there is hidden within an invitation to *live*. It can come from a friend or family member, a song on the radio, a dream, God...but it is always there. And sometimes it's best when it's a strong kick in the ass.

At 42 years old, I had emergency open-heart surgery. To say it tested my resilience would be a gross understatement. About two months after my surgery I was working out in cardiac rehab therapy next to Fran, a thin, seventy-eight-year-old wisp of air. Sweating under a barbell, I look over to discover that he is out-lifting me by thirty pounds. I'm ready to shoot myself. Christine, my rehab therapist overhears me muttering and laughingly asks, "What's wrong?"

"I'm tired of this!"

"Tired of what?"

"This! The exercise. The dieting. The struggle."

"So you want a cup or a bowl?"

"Excuse me?"

"A cup or a bowl?"

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"For your crybaby soup! Now get back to work."

A few years ago I was in Rwanda, working with an NGO called Women for Women International, a great organization that works with women in conflict and post-conflict.

Rwanda was a horror. Thirteen years ago, during the genocide, close to one million people were killed in one hundred days. Five hundred thousand women were raped.

The country was devastated and all these people, the victims and the perpetrators now live next to each other. The government in many cases has even forced communities who were torn apart to continue living together to make sure that reconciliation occurs. Imagine if your neighbor, who was a friend and whom you knew all your life, killed your husband in front of you with a machete, raped you and your daughter, maimed your son, but by some miracle left you living. And he still resided next door.

I met one woman to which the above scenario happened. After years of depression, she began to rebuild her life through my client. She began to choose life. She now has a thriving business selling beer and wholesaling fruit, with a cell phone and everything. She is happy and productive, returning from the depths.

I asked her how she could go on, given what she knows, given what she has experienced. Her answer was both simple and profound.

"What choice do I have?"

"Yes" I said. "But still, how do you go on?"

"It's what we humans do", she said. "We pick up what is left and we begin again."

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Step Three: "Move Forward". That is, get going. This means being responsible for your own life, and then...do something. It is a great fallacy to believe we never have options of action. There is always some course through—some choice of empowerment.

Sometimes it can be small daily things.

In Rwanda, for instance, one thing I was unprepared for how clean the country was. When you enter through customs they confiscate all plastic bags. They are illegal because they always end up as public trash. And there are flowers and gardens everywhere. The country is immaculate. The poorest sections of Rwanda are far cleaner than Peterborough. It is partly because once a month the country does a national clean-up day, and picks up it's garbage. This includes the president! In a meeting I asked President Kagame about this startling impression, and he told me, "You see...we went as low as a society could go. So now we keep our streets and neighborhoods clean

because it helps us to clean our souls. Picking up trash is a simple act that every Rwandan can do.”

Sometimes, of course, the actions are huge. In Rwanda they have something called Gacaca (meaning “justice in the grass”) Courts. Perpetuators of crimes confess their actions in front of the whole community and seek forgiveness from their victims. The woman I talked about above? The one who had lost her husband, and whose children had been attacked? The man who committed this crime, her neighbor, came and begged her for forgiveness. Remember, he had raped and/or killed her entire family. After quietly listening she told him she would forgive him, under **one** condition; that the two of them together start the first reconciliation movement for their area. She is now an important leader with this man in Rwanda's post-genocide era—a saint in a country filled with saints.

Step Four: "Connect" to others who can offer support.

Research tells us that a community of like-minded souls, whether our church, friends or an understanding network, provides the wisdom and solace needed to endure and grow. Even at our most vulnerable, our most fearful, it is in our connection to others where our humanity emerges.

I remember on September 11th witnessing the one image that will forever stand above all others. More than the planes exploding into the towers, more than people running covered in ash, more than the buildings collapsing. It was watching people, holding hands and jumping to their deaths. What a stunning reminder to us all. That their final action was one of connection and love—it remains as the most powerful testament I know to the innate human desire for support.

In my work all over the world, over and over again, the lesson is clear. Connection with others, especially those who are further down the road which you now walk, is one of the greatest transformational healing forces. As Steven Levine, says; “If you were going to die soon, and you only had one phone call you could make, whom would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting?”

Recently I was in New York City for a few days with my twenty-two year old stepdaughter Kate. She is tall, loving and gorgeous. But she is also at a time in her college career where what comes next is both a bit scary and unknown. Though an outdoor adventurer, lately Kate has been in need of a little confidence and inspiration. My idea, through the initiation of a friend, was to go on a typical New York bonding trip—a whirlwind of shows, museums, dinners and lots of new and different people.

On day three, after hauling Kate to yet another “art experience” (which featured a 78 year old woman’s honest but naked self-portraits) she was tired, cranky and more than a little over-whelmed. I

was feeling under appreciated and doing my best to be enthusiastic...but truthfully, the question of whether this had been a good idea had entered my mind more than once.

After lunch, I excused myself to go to the restroom. The unisex bathroom was classic SoHo...a mixture of obscenity, strange offerings and scratched out advertisements. But there to the right of the sink was a small yellow Post-It that had been placed low and out of the way so that I didn't at first notice it. It said, "You are loved" in bright red ink. I was touched. Someone in the middle of the most impersonal of places had managed to catch my attention in the deepest personal way. The note made me smile, shook me from my funk and gave me a little lift. I took a deep breath, dried my hands, and went back to Kate.

Making conversation a few blocks from the restaurant I started in. "You know what I love about New York?" I enthusiastically exclaimed. "You find the most interesting things in the public bathrooms. "It fascinates me. I just found a Post-It note in our restaurant's bathroom that said..."

Before I could finish my sentence, Kate grinning from ear to ear pulled a stack of Post-It notes from her pocket. Clutching them in her smooth fingers, she carefully held them up. They all said the same thing..."You are loved". She was the author.

Unbeknownst to me, this has been one of Kate's responses to the global crisis of hopelessness. She has for years gone around putting these Post-It notes in public places, awaiting unsuspecting people like me to discover them. In this case, however, she got to see the impact of her "You are loved" installations. That I was the recipient of her work was an added bonus. She did not do it for me. She just did it at the beginning of the meal because she was so inspired, and I happened to have found it at the end.

The final step is to "Give Back" in the spirit of gratitude. To say we feel grateful and act from that place is not to say that everything in our lives is necessarily great. It just means we are aware of our blessings. If you only think about your disappointments and unsatisfied wants, you will be prone to staying stuck in your struggle. If, however, you're fully aware of your disappointments but at the same time thankful for the good you have been given and for your chance to live, you will increase your chances for happiness. When you thank the Divine for being granted life, you are expressing the joy that comes from knowing, God wanted you to exist. And as God chooses your existence, so you must choose your own.

Carl Jung summed it up beautifully. He said, "When your life falls apart it can happen so quickly, so completely, so totally, so wonderfully you couldn't have done it yourself".

If all else fails, remember, that if you didn't get all the things you wanted, you can still be grateful for all the things you didn't want that you didn't get.

A few years ago, a fourteen-year-old boy shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim's mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of the killing. After the verdict was announced, she slowly stood up, stared at him directly and said, "I'm going to kill you." Then the youth was taken away to serve several years in a juvenile facility.

After the six months the mother of the slain child went to visit his killer. He had been living on the streets before the killing, and she was the only visitor he'd had. For a time they talked, and when she left she gave him some money for cigarettes. Then she started step by step to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts.

Near the end of his three-year sentence she asked him what he would be doing when he got out. He was confused and very uncertain, so she offered to help set him up in a job at a friend's company. Then she inquired about where he would live, and since he had no family to return to, she offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home.

For eight months he lived there, ate her food, and worked at the job. Then one evening she called him into the living room. She sat down opposite him and waited. Then she started, "Do you remember in the courtroom when I said I was going to kill you?" "I sure do," he replied. "I'll never forget that moment."

"Well, I did," she went on. "I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain on earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you a job and let you live in my house. That's how I set about changing you. And that old boy, he's gone, and that killer is gone. So now I want to ask you, since my son is gone, and the killer is gone, if you'll stay here. I've got room, and I'd like to adopt you if you'll let me."

And she became the mother of her son's killer, the mother he never had.

Finally, let's return to the question I asked you to start with...what does this mean to me? Take a minute to consider how *you* are in the world. Not our government, not our politicians, not "those" people who have done you injustice, but you. How do how you *personally* respond?

I leave you with the following story.

Twenty years ago when traveling with the circus, I had the opportunity to do something I'd always wanted to do . . . I went up on a flying trapeze. There I was, sixty feet in the air, standing on a tiny

platform with a 260-pound man swinging opposite me. All (and I say that broadly) I had to do was swing out on the trapeze three times and let go of my bar. My momentum would carry me toward my catcher, who promised me he wouldn't fail.

After what felt like an eternity, I gathered the courage to propel myself off my little platform. Out I swung . . . once, twice, three times. When it was time to let go, only one thought crossed my mind: "I can't!" I continued to swing back and forth, clutching the bar, hanging on for what I believed was dear life. I just couldn't let go.

So there I was, swinging sixty feet above the ground, legs flapping, trying to keep my momentum and dignity intact. Eventually there came a time when the pain of embarrassment overcame my fear of death. I could hear my friends below, enjoying my humiliation, carrying on as if they were at a comedy show (which, looking back at it, I guess they were). Finally I decided, "To hell with it." I took a deep breath and let go of the bar, and, even though I'm Jewish, the only words that came from my lips were, "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus . . ."

Of course, my momentum did exactly what I had been promised. I flew forward, was caught, and returned to my bar. Everything turned out just fine. But the memory of my fear, and the depth of strength it took to let go, is something I hold as especially powerful.

At some level, we are all like circus performers swinging on the trapeze. We are being asked, even implored, to let go of the bar. This bar represents our attachments to the old life. The problem is, not only don't we know whether someone is there to catch us, we may not know whether there is even another bar to grab. Still, if we are to be truly resilient we have no choice. We must let go, or risk being left behind for good. It is the core of all religion, the great teaching...that when all is said and done, our lives are ultimately a leap of faith.

Refuse to fall down.

And if you cannot refuse to fall down, then refuse to stay down.
And if you cannot refuse to stay down, then lift your heart to the heavens like a hungry beggar, and ask that it be filled and it will be filled.

You can be pushed down.

You can be kept from rising.

But nobody can keep you from lifting your heart to the heavens, except you.

In the middle of misery, much becomes clear.

Those who say, nothing good can come of this,

are not yet listening.

-Clarisa Pinkola Estes

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