

## **"The Resilience Toolbox"**

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister  
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
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<http://firstunitarian.org/assembly-january-7-the-resilience-toolbox/>

*The reading was the poem "Days," by Billy Collins.*

I want to open with a fable. It's a very short story by a 20<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts monk who was named Theophane.

In this particular fable that he wrote, there is a wise monk who is frequently sought out for counsel. The monk, however, never gives anyone direct advice. He only poses questions. One day a parish priest comes to see him and says, "I'm here on retreat. Could you give me a question?" The monk replies, "Ah, yes. My question for you is: What do they need?" The priest goes away disappointed, but he does spend a few hours wrestling with the question, writing out various answers. Finally, though, he goes back to the monk. "Excuse me," he says. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. When I asked you for a question, I wasn't really thinking about my parishioners. Could you give me a question for my own spiritual life?" "Ah, I see," the monk says. "In that case, my question is: What do they really need?"

I of course am not a priest, but I am a minister at a congregation. And the question that the monk offers is one that has stayed with me ever since I first heard that fable. "What do they really need?" It's a good guiding question for ministry or for any life of service.

And it's a question that got a lot more complicated a year ago, when our country got jolted into this new reality, a new reality that is actually the result of a number of longstanding old realities about the United States. And as we head into this second year of this way of being - with old hatreds and oppressive systems newly resurgent, with each day feeling precariously stacked upon the one before it - with all that's going on, resilience is one of the things that we, as individuals and as a community, really need. And that's why resilience is our theme this month here at First Unitarian Society

The idea of resilience has gotten a fair amount of attention the past few years. For example, there are countless articles to be read about how to make your kids more resilient. And there's been talk about how people who are working for justice might

remain resilient while carrying out resistance to so much of what's happening. A year ago around this time, we had some workshops here at FUS called "Resistance and Resilience," to offer some ideas on how to live out those two things in these perilous times.

Before we go on, I want to talk a bit about the definition of resilience. As Rev. David pointed out in our monthly newsletter, the word "resilient" can be broken down into two basic parts. The "re" at the front is pretty standard – it means to go back, to do again. The rest of the word has origins that mean to jump. So resilience means to be able to jump back – not backward, in retreat, but to jump back to where you were previously. To be able to recover or bounce back – this is what we mean by resilience.

Resilience is sometimes confused with endurance, which is not the same thing. To endure is to tolerate or even suffer under punishing circumstances. To endure something is to come out the other side, but often the worse for wear, and less ready for whatever is about to happen next.

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, a couple of happiness experts, Shawn Achor and Michelle Gielan, point out that American culture celebrates endurance to a perverse level, with workaholics bragging about their lack of a break, teenagers being encouraged to stay up all night to "give their all" to a project, athletes cheered on until their bodies or brains are broken beyond repair. The costs of this way of doing things is very high, financially and in terms of individual well-being. Achor and Gielan say that recovery time is crucial to resilience, that taking breaks pays off, and there's science to back this up. "The key to resilience," they say, "is trying really hard, then stopping, recovering, and then trying again."

One of the major challenges of being a thinking, caring person in America today is that there are no recovery breaks in what we are being asked to endure. There is no ebb-and-flow cycle in the bad news; it's all flow, and no ebb. Even these past few weeks, while we were supposed to be enjoying the year-end holidays, the plutocratic leadership of our country used this supposed down time to issue destructive edicts – about our oceans, about our northern Minnesota lakes, about fracking and offshore drilling, and rolling back rules that protect everything from nursing home patients to migratory birds to the integrity of the 2020 census. There is no time for recovery, and that is by design. Corporatism and authoritarianism are working together to try to wear us down so that we might be a fully conquered and fearful people.

How can we not let that happen?

Psychologists have studied resilient children to try to figure out the characteristics of such kids – kids who overcome upbringings filled with trauma and deprivation to become flourishing adults. Last year the New Yorker magazine looked at a major study that was conducted over a couple of decades with hundreds of kids in Hawaii. The leader of the study, a developmental psychologist named Emmy Werner, found that the resilient kids believed that they, and not their circumstances, determined their level of achievement. Even with all that was going on around them in their lives – poverty, family problems – the resilient kids saw themselves as “orchestrators of their own fate,” and they sought out new experiences that helped them achieve success in education and in their personal lives.

In a way, these resilient Hawaiian kids could be thought of as little humanists. They had an ingrained belief in human effort: their own.

This points to another of the major challenges for thinking, caring people in America right now, particularly middle-class and above people of a liberal or progressive bent: they might no longer feel like orchestrators of their own fates. After eight years of seeing their values at least generally reflected by the country’s top leader, the pendulum has swung hard, knocking the liberal middle back into a more helpless place – a place of helplessness where much of the country had already been living for some time. It can be hard to be resilient when you no longer feel like the author of your own story, when you feel like a background character being swept along in a tyrant’s drama.

Resilience might seem like a new topic because it’s been in the news. But religions and thought systems around the world have been addressing resilience, or at least endurance, for millennia. Werner, the psychologist who studied the Hawaiian kids, found that the resilient ones were far more likely to report having sources of spiritual and religious support in their lives. This raises a very interesting question: Does this mean that humanist-leaning, secular-leaning people are disadvantaged when it comes to resilience? Without some of the traditional religious tools for bouncing back, what do humanists have in their resilience toolbox?

First, let’s take a look at some of those traditional religious tools. One of those tools is the belief that each person is part of an unstoppable larger story progressing toward ultimate goodness, goodness that may be for everyone, or may be only for those who believe. The story is unstoppable because a powerful deity is in control. *God is in charge. Give your worries up to God.* So for those times when individuals don’t feel like the orchestrators of their own lives, there is still a comforting force. All will be well

in the end, if not in this life, at least in the next. This belief, this theological orientation, allows people to recharge, or at least gives them the strength to endure.

Another religious concept or practice is sabbath, which is the taking of breaks, on a regular and predictable basis or schedule. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, that break is one out of every seven days, which is how Sunday became the main day of relative rest across much of the western world. The Hebrew Scriptures, known to Christians as the Old Testament, also include provisions for every-seven-years sabbaticals, in which cropland is to be left fallow.

Days of rest for humans and years of rest for cropland are just a couple of examples of there being scientific evidence of the benefits of a religious practice. It's good for human beings to get regular rest to remain resilient; it's good for the earth to do the same.

There are other examples of this kind of scientific-religious parallel reasoning. For example, the ancient peoples in the arid regions of the Middle East largely stopped eating pork *before* the Judaic and Islamic dietary prohibitions were put in place. Richard Redding, an anthropologist at the University of Michigan, figured this out. The reasoning for not keeping pigs for food was entirely practical: chickens came along. Chickens produce more protein per amount of water consumed; a chicken can be eaten by a family in a day without anyone having to store or cure the meat; and chickens are more easily portable should one be a nomad or need to flee one's enemies. There was the equivalent of an evolutionary benefit to not keeping pigs, and the eventual religious rules helped maintain the practice.

I think this points to the fact that both traditionally religious and more secular-minded people can be confused about what is and what is not a good idea and why. Religious people are sometimes skeptical of secular reasoning; people who have been wounded by religion can be skeptical of ideas that have religious connections. But some things are just good ideas, like letting land go fallow for a year, avoiding raising pigs in a desert, and giving human beings regular rest so they can be resilient.

Another concept that can help with resilience but that sometimes gets overly identified with traditional religion is forgiveness. Forgiveness is actually a scientifically backed good idea, but it's an idea with a lot of religious connotations, and, for some people, baggage. That's probably because Judaism and Christianity (Catholicism in particular) have significant, visible rituals around forgiveness.

For Catholics, the ritual of confession/penance/reconciliation is one of the seven sacraments. It's right up there in importance with baptism and marriage. And Judaism has Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. It's the biggest holy day of the entire Jewish year - that's how important forgiveness can be. Both confession and Yom Kippur focus on having one's self forgiven, but that's still an important characteristic of resilience - being able to be forgiven and forgive one's self makes it possible to bounce back and carry on.

Congregational humanism is at something of a disadvantage here, being a relative new kid on the block. We don't have any direct, multi-millennial religious traditions to turn to. And as a mostly agnostic and atheistic bunch, we look out, not up, when it comes to forgiveness. But to forgive, if perhaps not divine, is still important.

I can still remember a sermon I heard way back when I was congregant over at First Universalist, probably eight years ago now. Rev. Justin Schroeder told those of us in the pews that refusing to forgive someone was like leaving an arrow stuck inside your body, choosing to live in continued pain instead of trying to heal. I was a little shocked by the imagery, and also shocked to realize that the behavior he was describing was something I did - refusing to forgive, leaving the arrow in, telling myself that I was doing so to somehow prevent future hurt, when really I was just perpetuating past wounds. My previous behavior reminds of the writer Anne Lamott's take on forgiveness, a perspective that works well for theists and non-theists alike. She says that we are not punished *for* not forgiving others; we are punished *by* not forgiving others. Medical professionals all the way up to the Mayo Clinic support this claim; forgiveness is good for you.

It's not just good for individuals; it's good for groups, and for institutions. Families, workplaces, congregations - all would cease to function without some measure of forgiveness. Not everything can be forgiven or should be forgotten, of course. There are times when an employee does need to quit a workplace to survive, or a congregant experiences too much hurt to stay, or a relative causes too much harm to continue a relationship. But forgiveness and staying in relationship can be a good starting goal to keep communities resilient.

This perhaps has never been more true in our country than right now, when so much is at stake, and so much of what is going wrong doesn't always have a clear remedy. What does our country really need? Well, this coming November - we have a lot of clarity about that, how we can put our values to work, with tried and true methods. But we are still in an extended period of uncharted territory, with lots of messy work and

mistakes to be made as we learn our way, as individuals, as communities, and in coalitions.

This past November in Chicago, I had the privilege of attending a one-day conference designed for staff members of large Unitarian Universalist congregations. The keynote speaker was Reesheda Washington, the executive director of a non-profit that works to lift up disadvantaged neighborhoods in cities around the country. Reesheda meets a lot of people in her work, and one of the things she told us was this. She said she knows she's in a true and authentic relationship with someone new if, about 15 minutes in, the two of them already owe each other an apology. That may seem counterintuitive, but what it means is that Reesheda and her new acquaintance have taken risks with each other and have been open and vulnerable. And it means that they have acknowledged misunderstandings that come with getting to know each other, and practiced forgiveness. Perfection in life is rarely possible, and a resilient relationship is one that can bounce back from the bumps.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from experts who study resilience is that words are extremely important. These experts tell us to practice optimism - to frame the future with words like "maybe" rather than "never." Avoid the contagion of pessimism, while still remaining connected to reality - hang around with optimists, because positive words do matter. Another tip is to practice self-compassion, to use kind words to describe your own mistakes, and pay close attention to the stories that you tell yourself about yourself. Was your failure 100 percent your fault, or really more like 50?

And even though it's the most natural thing in the world to replay the stories of failure - "if only we had done things differently in 2016" might be one such story - even though these are the stories that come to mind and won't leave, it's extremely important to replay the stories of comebacks, of personal successes, of resilience, to help remind us of the kinds of good that can happen in our lives and in the world. And combining good words with good actions can produce resilience. A recent study of U.S. military veterans found that the resilient among them scored high on gratitude, sense of purpose, and altruism. As that wise monk in the fable knew, asking what people really need and helping them get it is good for you.

I am not a resilience scientist, but I have one more resilience recommendation: that we listen to the stories of each other, especially listening to those stories from those among us who are living under some form of oppression (which, really, in our society, is a majority of people - a sign of how much work there is to be done). White people can learn about resilience from communities of color; men can learn about resilience from women; cisgender individuals can learn about resilience from transgender or

gender creative people; the more able-bodied can learn about resilience from the less able-bodied; the financially better-off can learn from the poor.

I don't recommend that dominant groups go around asking to be educated by members of more oppressed groups; if folks living with oppressions want to help or offer you their story, they might do so, but they already have plenty to do, and their stories are not hard to find if you look around.

The main point is that one of the most amazing things about resilience is that it can be learned, cultivated, and increased, by just about anyone. And so by being aware and reading up and paying attention to those with whom we share this world, each of us can add to our resilience toolbox - a toolbox we're all really going to need to get through this new, complicated, and extremely important year. Let's get to it.