



Words for the Journey

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Each of us
is an
artist of
our days .
. . .
-John
O'Donohue

“Springing Up” by Kathleen McSweeney, © 2013

A confession: I was a high school cheerleader. Friday night football was filled with blinding white lights, pounding drum beats, teams bursting onto the field . . . High drama, which we cheerleaders compounded by jumping, dancing, and yelling in unison. I loved it.

Surprisingly, my most vivid memory from our games is of a varsity running back, revered by young and old fans. Chuck, an academic star, was at least a foot shorter and fifty pounds lighter than his teammates and opponents, but he ran fast. And immediately after Chuck was knocked down, he didn't get back up, he sprang back up. Every game. Every time. No matter how hard he had been hit.

In witnessing Chuck's resilience, I became intrigued with the notion. Through the years, I've looked for models to help me prepare for times when I'm hit hard. Fortunately, examples of resilience are everywhere. We see them in families rebuilding after a death or divorce, in employees dealing with difficult work environments, in persons struggling financially. We can be inspired by models of resilience like Nelson Mandela, renowned South African leader, and Dr. Terry Sullivan, current president of the University of Virginia, who overcame adversity with grace while in public spotlights. And we can also respect the hardships and challenges we ourselves meet in our everyday lives.

Springing back from hardship is at the heart of resilience, which the American Psychological Association calls “*the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress - such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences.*”

Certain building blocks for resilience recur throughout recent research: awareness of our strengths as individuals; relationships with others we can depend on to help; curiosity and openness to situations; kindness, appreciation, and gratitude; belief in our ability to create positive outcomes.

Resilience can be reinforced in individuals and also in communities; Twelve Step groups are an example. When we talk with a recovering person, we likely hear about the importance of connection in their lives, through regular meeting participation and sponsor relationships. We hear about service, about keeping things simple, and about not getting overly hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. Recovery requires self-care, service, and facing hardship squarely, with integrity, courage, and support, consistent with what we're learning are requirements for resilience.

The force
of the
waves is in
their
persistence

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Gila Guri

Many education specialists have begun to focus on resilience as core learning for our children. Until recently, theorists believed that children who overcame the odds in the midst of chronic adversity were exceptional, that somehow these girls and boys were genetically gifted with the capacity to be resilient. Researchers have since discovered several key elements that determine resilience in children, such as having a close relationship with an adult a child can rely on over time, someone they can be themselves with and be encouraged by. Children's awareness of their own competencies, seeing themselves as problem-solvers, is another characteristic of resilience. Some school systems are incorporating these and other resilience factors into their curricula.

We adults also may be motivated to increase our capacity to bounce back. Researchers tell us resilience begins with what an individual believes. Here Barbara Frederickson of the University of North Carolina is a valuable resource. She has found that the most resilient people have a way of experiencing negative emotions, like sadness, side by side with positive emotions. An example is, at a time of loss, simultaneously experiencing grief as well as gratitude for support that's being provided.

Dr. Frederickson points out that negative emotions grab our attention more powerfully than positive emotions do. This means we need to experience a greater degree of positive emotions, like joy and love, than negative emotions like sadness and fear. In her research, Frederickson discovered that a ratio of 3:1, positive to negative emotions, is required for positivity. She distinguishes between heartfelt positivity and a Pollyanna kind of being positive. This false positivity, which she calls "toxic insincerity," actually backfires, becoming emotionally and physically toxic.

Positivity and mindfulness share a similar mindset, one that is open, expansive, and aware, seeing both positive and negative without judgment. Dr. Frederickson assures us we don't have to work intensely to increase our positivity. Instead, she advocates "frequent, mild doses" of practice.

At times, resilience appears in a lighter vein: Hugh Jackman, in accepting a 2013 Golden Globe for his performance in "Les Miserables," said: "... before we started filming, we had a terrible day at rehearsal ... a humiliating day ... I came home and said: 'I've gotta' ring in. I've gotta' get someone else to play this role. I've bitten off more than I can chew.' My wife talked me off that cliff, like she talks me off it most days." Then the actor thanked his wife and the people who cast their votes for him as best actor in a feature film.

Reflections:

- What strengths help you cope with adversity?

- What would you estimate your positivity ratio to be on most days?

(View Barbara Frederickson's explanation of positivity and positivity ratio:

<http://tinyurl.com/8ecf47h>

Additional resources:

- Martin Seligman on learned optimism and flourishing

- ABC Model: <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/abc.htm>

Kathleen McSweeney is a leadership coach, photographer, and Chrysalis Group Council member. Kathleen is active in a writing group whose members offer each other inspiring feedback and a book club where she experiences the richness a collaborative group can bring to any novel.