

The Resiliency in Becoming

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 15, 2026

In my journey as a chaplain, I bore witness to myriad group settings created to help heal – from support groups to residential treatment centers. Through this profound work, and through my own personal life, the theme of overcoming trauma and adversity is close to my heart. During this time of my life, I saw, in the eyes of many, hopelessness, feelings of failure, and isolation. Yet I also saw resilience, strength, and compassion. Myriad experiences, a multitude of responses. I likewise saw two unfolding journeys for these aching people: one of meaning and compassion, and one of anger and isolation. I noted what happened when people engaged with intentional healing. Pico Lyur of the New York Times wrote, “I have found that our lives are determined less by what happens to us than by what we make of what happens to us.”¹ What happens to us? I do not need to list a litany of hardships to know the prevalence of suffering. You each know what you hold in your heart. Yet this does not define us. It can serve, instead, as a catalyst to a more fulfilling life, if that is what intentionally and persistently make of it.

I want to start with a distinction. When we hear the word “trauma” or “adversity,” our minds may leap to devastating, uncommon events. And yet I invite us into a more inclusive understanding of these terms. We each face adversity, that is part of the nature of being human. Whether I speak of childhood or adulthood, I believe these ideas can be applicable to many of us, to one degree or another. Live into your own experience, invite your own experience, tend to your own experience. This is what I encourage you to do today.

In many ways, who we are at our core is shaped and molded by how we respond to adversity. I am reminded of a relatively common vignette compiled from my time fostering healing and spiritual growth. Two sisters responded to the tragic death of a third sibling. The experience

¹ “The Secret of Happiness” by Pico Lyur

was immensely traumatic, devastating, and sorrowful. Yet the trajectories of their futures differed greatly. One sought support and meaning making. In her mourning, she became more resilient and compassionate. The other sister slipped into despair and hopelessness. She isolated herself and compiled distorted healing practices. She suffered from anger and isolation. Neither sister was stronger nor weaker than the other. There are reasons for these reactions well beyond our control. Yet, this distinction is, in one way, a choice – a seemingly daunting, or impossible choice – but a choice nonetheless. I hope this is not overwhelming, but inspiring. Bruce Perry, psychiatrist and neuroscientist, offers this: “Some people will keep rising; others will drown. None will ever be the same”² When we heal, we do not erase what has happened to us nor push it to the side. It has changed us, fundamentally, for the better or the worse. We will never again be the person we were before death or addiction or abuse. And in this rising and in this drowning, in this inevitable change, we see that healing moves between the two. It is not a trajectory of sorrow that only leads to more sorrow, nor of compassion that only leads to more compassion. It is a meandering, winding road we follow – towering hills that exhaust us, trees that block the view of what lies ahead, winding paths that assure us that there is a way forward. It is never too late to choose a different route.

When many of us embark upon a journey of faith or self-discovery or meaning making we ask ourselves this: “Who am I?” When perhaps we should ask “Who did I become to survive?”³ In order to know who we truly are, we need to shed the layers of survival techniques and connect with what has been buried within our subconscious. So much of this may stem from our early years, for who we were then shapes who we are today. Who did I become to survive? In childhood, there are predictable but not universal reactions to trauma. And we can embody these traits to a greater or lesser degree. Perhaps one child adapts and survives by trying to make themselves invisible, hiding, becoming remote, and silencing who they are as they slip into the recesses of the family. Another becomes a lost child, avoiding imminent danger by striving to be perfect in school, in work, in relationships. Perhaps a third transforms into a

² *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey, pg, 187

³ “When Trauma Becomes Your Story: How to Reclaim Your Identity After Abuse,” Dr. Kate Truitt

peacekeeper, finding safety by always putting others ahead of themselves to avoid conflict at all costs.⁴ There are so many ways we grow and adapt as our young selves seek to persevere. And yet this no longer serves us. These identities now serve to our detriment.

These children - this is who we were. And yet the change and growth we strived for – as well as this acknowledgement of who we have been and what we have endured and who we are becoming – opens the door for so many crucial, life affirming questions offered by psychologist Kate Truitt, questions that stem far beyond childhood adversity. What parts of myself have I hidden in a search for survival? Who do I want to become now that I am safe? What do I want to rediscover that has been hidden beneath layers of survival?

Growth after adversity is not returning to the person you were before the events happened. It is, instead, quote, “An invitation into becoming someone you’ve never been allowed to be.” In our adversity, many of us embodied a false self, a false narrative. In healing, our true selves can be liberated. Yet this new self is not instantaneous. It comes with therapy. It comes with support groups. It comes with faith. With self-care. We can finally embody our full, true, authentic selves. We can reclaim ourselves and our strength and our individuality after months, years, or decades of distortion or silence or survival. We grieve that which once kept us safe: the perfectionist, the invisible one: Those identities that we bravely created and clung to. As such, we enter, instead “uncharted territory”⁵ - we connect with our spirits and our souls and that still, small voice within. It is scary, and it is brave! Recovering from adversity is not the conclusion of your story. It is the beginning. It is the beginning of a life lived in authenticity.

After all that has happened in the past, we can re-write our future. I think of a woman I knew years ago whose alcoholic father caused great distress that she carried with her into adulthood, embodying people-pleasing tendencies as a way to avoid all potential conflict. She struggled

⁴ “The Laundry List” of Adult Children of Alcoholics and Dysfunctional Families

⁵ “Navigating Identity Loss During Post-Traumatic Growth” by Rev. Sheri Heller

with depression. And yet she was met with a moment of clarity, realizing in her very bones that this was not the life she wanted to live anymore. She wanted to persevere. And so, with intentional work and dedication, one step at a time, she healed. She started an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting at her church, inviting folks from her community into those sacred walls. She connected with what she wanted in her soul and became a mother. We can create a real and tangible place where we are no longer defined by our adversities or who we became to survive them. We can find meaning in helping others with similar adversities. We can find hope and strength in other survivors that allows us to persevere and reclaim a fruitful life. We can use our ailments and the healing we have done to create a more compassionate outlook towards neighbors, friends, and strangers. We become a source of strength. Rabbi Menachem Schneerson offers this: “We must translate pain into action, and tears into growth.”⁶

How can we learn to face adversity from our Unitarian Universalist faith? Part of our continuous and intentional spiritual journey is to discern what divinity looks like in our lives. We grapple with what life giving to us, what encourages us to live our best lives of faith and compassion, what serves as a guiding force through pain and tumult. It is this – this essence greater than all that is, was, and ever will be – emerging as a source of strength and perseverance that guides us towards healing. As such we can be guided towards a new life sustained by all things sacred and holy. Perhaps a spontaneous connection with a living, breathing force of nature offers that first spark towards creating a new life. Furthermore, we remember that, though so many of our histories make us feel unworthy or unlovable – whether dealing with anger or chaos or belittling – we are inherently worthy. We are imbued with life giving dignity. We are loved by the finite and the infinite alike; both the immanent and the transcendent.

Let us return to the poem we read earlier by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. She writes about broccoli, quote,

It knows to grow,

⁶ Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, The Lubavitcher Rebbe

to grow despite the damage, to grow,
because damage. To grow. It knows
to grow, because that is what we are here to do⁷

We will each be damaged, that is part of the human experience. No one escapes detriments. We suffer. And yet, despite these adversities, even because of these adversities, we grow. Perhaps that is one purpose and goal we have in this finite realm – to react to adversity by creating a more just, beautiful, and compassionate world for ourselves and all of those in our midst. Because we are damaged, we heal. We become greater versions of ourselves. It is a journey of becoming.

I want my last reflection to be a call to action. In discussions I had while crafting his sermon, one theme arose. Children need us. Whether they faced extreme trauma or less severe adversity, so much is needed to craft and mold a better future, a resilient future. Just engaging with a compassionate, understanding, predictable neighbor, aunt, teacher, or clergy person is imbued with impact. During periods of adversity, a role model can be enough to help a young person scale their obstacles, whether more common afflictions and distress, or the seemingly insurmountable. In other words, just having a significant person who could make a difference, who can listen to laments or offer much needed hope is often the distinction between a child who can grow through adversity and survive obstacles, and one who succumbs to it. This inspiration and strength can come from a long-standing relationship, or a single profound experience steeped with impact. So, may we be that counselor. May we be that nurse. May we be the one who changes the trajectory of a child's life as we mentor and guide and love and offer hope and compassion. Let us help them thrive.

These are our journeys. Our faith journeys – our journeys of survival. These are the choices we make that change the trajectory of our entire lives. May that sacred rustling of wind through the dead, winter leaves - all that we hold sacred and holy - remind us of the power of choosing

⁷ "Considering Resilience" by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

life – choosing, not anger and isolation, but compassion and strength. The path may be arduous, and it is certainly unpredictable, but rest assured, it is there. And you need not journey alone, but with fellow sojourners, with the ancestors, with the wind. You are not alone in your difficulties so may you find your own hardships mirrored in the eyes of another. May we find hope in those who have persevered, strength in those who use their pain for good, and joy in those who are living their full lives, their full potential. So, go forth. Go forth, finding that space where pain becomes action and tears become growth. Go forth, knowing that our lives are determined less by what happens to us than by what we make of it. Go forth, each of you, as your authentic, beautiful, compassionate, and wildly imperfect selves. Go forth, beloveds, and shine.

May it be so, and amen.