

“Pushing Through, Toughing It Out, Bouncing Back--Three Myths of Resilience”

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Together we will examine three common myths of resilience and explore alternatives that are more consistent with our faith.

Introduction

In our Story for All Ages, bamboo weathered storms through flexibility and cooperation. Yet, our society prescribes toughness and self-reliance to deal with adversity. This morning we will examine three common myths of resilience and explore alternatives that are more consistent with our faith.

Myth #1: Resilience means Pushing Through.

Quitting

My beloved high school math teacher often quipped, “Winners never quit, and quitters never win.” Persevering through tough equations is fine, but this may not be the best advice in all situations. Consider the athletic pursuit taken too hard that causes debilitating injury. The job that takes a toll on mental health. The toxic or abusive relationship.

In her TED Talk, “A Better Way to Talk About Resilience,”¹ personal development coach Emem Washington offers:

“Sure grit and resilience mean pushing through against all odds.

But sometimes being able to say, “I quit,” and to actually quit, takes grit.

It takes resilience. Sometimes withstanding adversity looks like withdrawing from certain activities. Sometimes pushing through looks like pulling out...”

¹  A Better Way to Talk About Resilience | Emem Washington | TEDxTAMU
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL9GAoBYa3g>

I reflect on a time when I wish I'd had that wisdom: in the last half of my last semester of college, when I was student teaching. I can spin quite a yarn about it, but let me cut to the chase: As a student teacher, I failed miserably, and I felt miserable. I lacked the maturity, awareness, and confidence that the job required. I spent every waking moment either working or fretting. In hindsight, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. At the time there were many reasons it seemed sensible to push through. I had already been accepted to grad school to pursue my love of research. Student teaching was 9 credit hours, and if I didn't complete it I wouldn't graduate. With grad school in my sights, it didn't occur to me that quitting student teaching was even an option. Yet, in retrospect, I wonder how things would have been if I'd taken the risk of quitting.

Sacred No

I've matured a lot in the nearly 40 years since then, and I think I've gotten better at knowing my limits. If I haven't arrived at the point of being comfortable with quitting, at least I've become much more comfortable with saying "No." Part of this comes from my experiences here at Channing Memorial Church. When I served on the Leadership Development and Nominating Committee, followed by two terms as president, I often turned to the book *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice*, by Erik Walker Wikstrom. One bit of wisdom that sticks with me from that book is this:

"Your 'no' is as sacred as your 'yes'."

Saying no to volunteer requests that didn't feel right has freed me up to say yes to ones that fit. To paraphrase Frederick Buechner, leadership roles where my great joy meets the world's great need--or at least the church's current need.

Rest

The sacred no also reminds me of the importance of rest. Activist Tricia Hersey, who calls herself The Nap Bishop, asserts that rest is a form of resistance to the grind culture of fast-paced production and consumerism.² I say that rest is also a form of resilience that helps us remedy the ravages of that grind culture.

²  Rest is Resistance _ Can I Get an Amen _rev boggis

When my daughter, Amira, heard that the February Soul Matters topic was resilience, she immediately thought of land resilience. She shared the importance of letting the land rest. Allowing cover crops to take over for a while. Allowing nutrients to soak in and compost. Great analogies for how letting ourselves rest can nurture our resilience in life.

At their core, quitting, the sacred no, and rest are all means of letting go. Like the single bamboo stalk in the storm, resilience can be found in bending rather than toughening; in yielding rather than forcing.

In terms of our Unitarian Universalist values, I find the closest match in our definition of Equity: “We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.” Giving ourselves permission to rest, to say no, and even to quit are ways to uphold our inherent worthiness and dignity and to treat ourselves with love and compassion.

Resilience, therefore, can be about letting go of what isn’t serving us, rather than just pushing through an untenable situation.

Myth #2: Resilience means Toughing It Out.

Sometimes we face situations where the relief of quitting is greatly outweighed by the consequences. And there are some situations where we can’t say no--hardship is simply thrust upon us. In the face of things that must be endured, resilience means having the strength to tough it out, right? Our culture teaches the myth that self-reliance is the way to go. Social justice activist Soraya Chemaly writes:

The idea of resilience is shaped by the highly individualistic nature of our culture. We learn through stories, news headlines, popular movies, education materials, sports culture, militarism and more that individuals suffer but, if “strong,” persevere and even “grow.” We mainly learn to think that our coping with stress and loss, or adapting to adversity and trauma is mainly up to us as individuals... [but] we didn’t evolve to survive in this environment as atomistic, separately self-sufficient beings who live in relations of competition and domination, which

are underlying assumptions of mindset models of “resilient strength,” and “mental toughness” models.³

In her book *The Resilience Myth: New Thinking on Grit, Strength, and Growth After Trauma*, Chemaly writes:

“In spectacular arrogance, our mainstream vision of resilience encourages us to ignore, minimize, and even punish the desire for our greatest resilience assets: interdependence, collective versatility, and shared care. Instead of revealing our relationships to one another, our environments, and the systems we live in, this vision highlights and glorifies self-sufficiency, limitless positivity, and individual strength against all odds. It makes us less resilient, not more...”⁴

Interdependence

As an alternative to self-reliance, our faith shows us that there are other ways to be resilient, through our Unitarian Universalist value of Interdependence. When we face personal challenges, we can call on friends, support groups, agencies, and professionals. Like the bamboo stalk in our Story for All Ages, “That is when we rely on the grove.” Around here, we have resources like NAMI, PFLAG, Humanim, The Howard County Food Bank, Grassroots, the Howard County Cares & Shares Facebook group, and many more--connecting us to people and services for support.

Chemaly observes:

No one is resilient alone, at all times, and in all situations. Resilience is a dynamic process and it is healthier and more accurate to say that we take turns being resilient for one another...⁵

“We take turns being resilient for one another.” That really resonated with me. When I first read that, I immediately thought of my husband, Ashruf. When we find ourselves in crisis situations involving parenting, caring for aging parents, or household matters, we often somehow manage to tag team--to take turns having our breakdowns--and to be

³ Soraya Chemaly -- Quotation from the February 2026 Soul Matters Worship Research packet.

⁴ *The Resilience Myth: New Thinking on Grit, Strength, and Growth After Trauma* by Soraya Chemaly, as quoted in the February 2026 Soul Matters Worship Research packet.

⁵ Soraya Chemaly -- Quotation from the February 2026 Soul Matters Worship Research packet.

strong for one another through the crises. Such reciprocity can also be found in trusted family, in true friendships, and among our own Channing beloved community.

I'm going to add a plug here to participate in the Care Team survey that was emailed in mid-December. In the bustle of the holidays, I was overwhelmed and then lost sight of it, but inspired by Soraya Chemaly's teachings, I'm ready to take part now.

Resilience, therefore, can be about being resourceful and leveraging support, rather than just toughing it out with our own devices.

Myth #3: Resilience means Bouncing Back.

This myth about resilience surrounds the objective in overcoming trauma: the idea that our goal is to "bounce back" from whatever happened. Yet, as former governor and U.S. Navy Seal Purple Heart recipient Eric Greitens observes:

Life's reality is that we cannot bounce back. We cannot bounce back because we cannot go back in time to the people we used to be. The parent who loses a child never bounces back. The nineteen-year-old who sails for war is gone forever, even if he returns. You know that there is no bouncing back. There is only moving through... What happens to us becomes a part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives.

As we face challenges, do we really want to go back, when we have the opportunity to go forward? Moving through trauma is like a metamorphosis. Angelic Ain Ra, admin of the Facebook group Divine Souls, writes:

I learnt in high school that when a butterfly is struggling to get out of the cocoon and you cut the cocoon to help it out, the butterfly dies. You have to let the butterfly struggle, because the struggle forces blood into the wings, so they can spread them and fly. The same goes for us. The struggles we go through are necessary to make us strong enough to soar through life.⁶

⁶ Angelic Ain Ra -- Quotation from the February 2026 Soul Matters Worship Research packet.

So I ask, If we find ourselves stuck in the primordial goo of suffering, do we really want to just crawl out and go back to our caterpillar life? If we're going to experience the struggle anyway, we might as well emerge as a butterfly. This is consistent with our Unitarian Universalist value of Transformation.

When I think of healthy ways to integrate hard experiences into my life to create transformation, three gifts of adversity come to mind.

- The first is Experience, "What have we learned here?" Once I've been through it, I have greater understanding and better resources to face a similar situation in the future.
- The second is Compassion. When I have lived through a challenge, I have more empathy and care for those going through something similar.
- The third is Service. Based on my experience and my compassion, I am better equipped to serve as a resource for others in need. To use the bamboo analogy, I become a stronger member of the grove.

Resilience, therefore, can be about being transformed by our challenges, rather than trying to get back to the status quo.

Conclusion

So now that we've explored these three myths of resilience, what have we learned?

- We countered the myth of Pushing Through with the wisdom of Letting Go, consistent with our Unitarian Universalist value of inherent worthiness.
- We countered the myth of Toughing It Out with the wisdom of Leveraging Support, consistent with our Unitarian Universalist value of Interdependence.
- We countered the myth of Bouncing Back with the wisdom of Moving Through, consistent with our Unitarian Universalist value of Transformation.

Our culture will keep putting on the pressure to view resilience as Pushing Through, Toughing It Out, and Bouncing Back. Through practice and patience, may we heed the wisdom of the bamboo, as we learn to rely on the resilience found in Letting Go, Leveraging Support, and Moving Through.

May it be so. And Amen