



And still they persist

Clay Nelson © 10 March 2019

Last Friday was International Women's Day. What better example of persistence is there than women resisting the dehumanising evils of patriarchy for over 5000 years?

As an example, I offer Senator Elizabeth Warren, a senator from Massachusetts who is currently seeking the Democratic nomination for president. Two years ago, she was a fervent opponent of President Trump's nominee for Attorney General, Senator Jeff Sessions from Alabama.

Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader, objected to her speech in opposition to the nomination because he claimed she broke an arcane Senate rule not to demean another senator as she sought to read a 1986 letter by Coretta Scott King on the day before the vote. King's letter criticized Mr. Sessions, a Republican, when he was up for a federal judgeship, for using "the awesome power of his office to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens" while serving as a United States attorney in Alabama.

The chair of the Senate, a Republican, acknowledged the objection. After a debate a vote was held to silence Senator Warren. The vote was along party lines and she lost 49 to 43 and silenced from speaking further on the nomination. After the vote McConnell had this to say, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

His words created a firestorm on social media with the hashtag "LetLizSpeak".

Warren could very well have been channeling the sentiment of 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai, who wrote: "I was grounded in that moral fiber of wanting to do the right thing. I was so sure that this was the right thing because it was so obvious and even those who were persecuting me knew, and I knew they knew...I was doing the right thing. But they didn't want me to do it because it was inconveniencing them, and I knew that."

It could be said that Elizabeth Warren possesses a particular facility for perseverance – the ability to persist in her efforts, even in the face of mighty opposition. How did she come by that ability? Is it an inborn part of her being or something that has been cultivated over time through her experiences of life? While we can never know the precise combination of factors that lead to any given person's ability to develop a strength of character, we can learn from their example and be inspired, and perhaps be drawn to our own self-reflection.

In the 1970s toy company Hasbro introduced a balancing toy called a Weeble. Inside each roly-poly egg-shape is a weight at the bottom centre. When the Weeble is tipped over, that weight lifts and the force of gravity causes the toy to return to its upright position. It wobbles a little bit before it comes to a standstill. That's what led to the popular catch phrase used to advertise it: "Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down."

Something similar occurs with people. Like Weebles, resilient or persistent people wobble but they don't fall down. Like the Weeble, you could say a persistent person has a low centre of gravity. They have a large base of support and high stability.

This is certainly true of our ability to be physically resilient. Our physical centre of gravity is the point in the body where our weight is evenly distributed. For most people that's our lower abdomen. We can improve our physical resiliency by training the muscles along the whole torso.

But resilience isn't just a matter of physics. It's also a matter of psychology and spirituality. Studies of community responses to natural disasters have revealed some interesting findings in this regard. Communities need stronger bridges, better barriers to flooding, improvements to the communications grid, and other physical improvements. But they also need stronger neighbourhood ties where footpath chats and corner cafes flourish. Strengthening the social infrastructure turns out to be every bit as important as improving the physical one.

These studies also reveal a fairly commonly held false belief about the quality of perseverance, a belief that consistently trips us up in our efforts to cultivate it in our lives. It is a belief centred in our ideology of individualism, our "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" mentality, our cultural worship of the lone-wolf hero.

This cultural mentality led Canadian poet and writer, Shane Koyczan, to observe, "People cry not because they are weak. It's because they've been strong too long."

Filmmaker/activist Michael Moore shares this anecdote about a forgotten lesson he learned in high school music. "Sometimes in band or choir, music requires players or singers to hold a note longer than they actually can hold a note. In those cases, we were taught to mindfully stagger when we took a breath so the sound appeared uninterrupted. Everyone got to breathe, and the music stayed strong and vibrant... So let's remember the advice of music: Take a breath. The rest of the chorus will sing. The rest of the band will play. Re-join so others can breathe. Together, we can sustain a very long, beautiful song for a very, very long time. You don't have to do it all, but you must add your voice to the song."

When we combine Koyczan's quote with Moore's invitation to breathe, we suddenly see that balance plays a bigger role in perseverance than we often assume. To be a people of perseverance, we are being called not just to grit and strong wills, but to gentleness and self-care. Constantly pushing ourselves without also giving ourselves the gift of pause gets us nowhere. Digging deeper without making time to deepen and fill our wells is a recipe for self-inflicted pain.

All of which is to say that maybe vulnerability is the real secret to perseverance. Maybe admitting you're tired and asking for help is the real strength that gets us through. That dominant myth of Sisyphus pushing his rock up that endless hill hasn't done us any favours. We assume that Sisyphus is suffering because his work is endless, but maybe it's his isolation and lack of a place to rest that is his true torment.

According to various studies, it turns out that humans in general are designed with the ability to be psychologically persistent. From a psycho-spiritual perspective, we are built like Weebles. It is innate. This makes sense because life entails so many stresses and changes, from loss and aging, to job changes, to births and even happy occasions.

Even positive events place stress on us. Just think about when you or one of your children got married. Or think about when that newborn came home from the hospital. Or think about when you started university or an exciting new job. If this ability to manage stress were not part of our makeup, none of us would be able to get through the day.

The good news is that persistence is the norm. It isn't something extraordinary or exceptional that some people have and others don't or can't have. The even better news is that we can improve our skills. Those who are already fairly resilient can learn to be more resilient. After all it's not the kind of thing we are likely to have mastered to the point where we wouldn't like to be better at it. Those who are finding themselves to be less resilient and who are struggling to find their centre of gravity can be especially heartened.

So here's the sixty-four thousand dollar question: How do we become more resilient? How do we lower our centre of gravity?

It turns out that cultivating resilience has a lot to do with belief and habits of mind, which we can also call spiritual practices. In a recent interview on NPR, Andrew Zolli, co-author of the book *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, says some of the things we can do to bolster resilience are “intriguingly about your belief system and about your habits of mind.”

One of the most effective ways to cultivate resilience is through spiritual practice — what Zolli calls habits of mind. Brain studies of actively meditating Buddhist monks reveal the benefits of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness practices. Similar results have been found when studying the brain activity of nuns praying. These practices help people learn to better regulate their emotions.

Becoming more resilient strengthens our ability to move with life's change, becoming those proverbial trees bending in the wind. Bending with life is preferable to being shattered by it.

Our beliefs matter too. One belief that bolsters resilience is that the world is meaningful. It includes being committed to finding a meaningful purpose. Believing that life is meaningful and purposeful does not require or reject belief in God or a higher power. It does not require a set way of understanding God or the divine.

This fits well with our diverse Unitarian theological framework. For humanists, this meaning-making may be understood to be completely at the hands of humans. For theists, the sense of meaning and purpose may be understood to derive from God, who instils the universe with meaning and from whom we receive our call to purpose. This might include the understanding that God created the world and cares about what happens to us. Many individuals find great comfort and support in this image of the divine.

When we are able to find meaning in life, we are less likely to feel distress about disturbing events. We are more likely to be optimistic and confident. Belief in a meaningful existence is expressed in the Unitarian principle that calls us to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It's also expressed in our encouragement to spiritual growth.

Another focus of resilient individuals is on making the world a better place. Those who have successfully weathered change and received the help and support of others recognise how essential our relationships and communities are to our own ability to survive. Unitarians hold

a strong ethic of justice-seeking and service. We seek to build a better world. Our principles express this commitment in our affirmation of the worth and dignity of every person and our call for justice, equity and compassion in human relationships. We are called to respect each person's human rights and to work to protect those rights.

Helping others is good for the world and also improves our own well-being. So those who want to improve their ability to bounce back, might do well to lend a helping hand.

It probably won't surprise many of you to learn that believing we can influence our surroundings and outcomes is another key to human persistence. This is a belief in human agency and that we have some control over our own choices and outcomes. In other words, we are participants in life, not pawns. We don't have control over everything, but we do have a voice and a hand in creating the world we want for ourselves and others.

This is a pretty fiercely held value among Unitarians. When asked to identify themselves along a scale of freedom to determinism, most Unitarians will be found tightly huddled at the freedom end, maybe even competing to be at the most extreme end of it. This doesn't necessarily exclude God from the picture, but it does suggest that humans are at the very least co-creators in events.

Related to this is the belief that we learn and grow from both positive and negative experiences. Albert Einstein said it this way, "In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity." Those who are resilient find the opportunities. Because none of our lives are entirely without pain or stress, our success and happiness depends not on avoiding problems so much as learning to move with them.

Personal experience is one of the primary sources of our faith. We use our own stories of success and failure to help us better understand ourselves and the world. It is through our personal experiences that we are opened to the source of life. Our painful experiences as well as our joyful ones hold the potential to open us to life.

Taoism teaches that: "change is the essence of life and going with the flow is the best way to manage things." In the words of Lao Tzu: "the rigid and inflexible will surely fail while the soft and flowing will prevail."

Our religion offers us resources and tools that can bolster our resilience, our ability to persist. This includes our principles and sources of faith as well as our embrace of spiritual practices of prayer and meditation that foster mindfulness. Embracing and cultivating these values and habits of mind can help us become more like Weebles. We can lower our centre of gravity and build our core. We're all going to wobble from time to time. But we can learn how to get back up, how to be more open to life.