

Resilience
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from chapter 3 of the Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*
translated by Thomas Cleary

The mind is restless, unsteady, hard to guard, hard to control. The wise one makes it straight, like a fletcher straightens an arrow.

The mind is mercurial, hard to restrain, alighting where it wishes. It is good to master this mind; a disciplined mind brings happiness.

Let the wise one watch over the mind, so hard to perceive, so artful, alighting where it wishes; a watchfully protected mind brings happiness.

The mind travels afar, acts alone, is incorporeal, and haunts a cave; those who will control it escape the bonds of bedevilment.

For the wakeful one whose mind is unimpassioned, whose thoughts are undisturbed, who has given up both virtue and sin, there is no fear.

“The Wild Geese” by Wendell Berry

Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grape, sharp sweet
of summer's end. In time's maze
over fall fields, we name names
that went west from here, names
that rest on graves. We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale, in the seed's marrow.
Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

Sermon

Here I am about to preach a sermon on resilience, and what I'm thinking is that I'm looking at the sermon.

I know something of what many of you have been through – and something of what some of you are going through right now. And I can only imagine what I don't know about your lives.

Yet... you got yourselves out of bed this morning, had your breakfast or coffee or tea, and got yourselves here when no one was forcing you to be here.

Resilience... in the midst of grief or illness... broken relationships... financial challenges... difficult life transitions of so many kinds.

You are the sermon. You are the inspiration... for me... and for each other.

How is it that you have been able to keep on?

Here's one story of resilience... which in one way leaves unanswered the question of how we keep on, and in other ways tells us all we need to know.

Dr. David King is a trauma surgeon at Mass General Hospital. He has also run dozens of marathons, one of which was the 2013 Boston Marathon.

He completed the race before the bombings. But before he had a chance to get home, shower, change, he learned what had happened at the finish line and headed not home, but straight to Mass General.

Then, for hours he and the teams of doctors and nurses and aides tended to the wounded and maimed. And when the initial work of saving lives was complete, he sat with the others in a conference room to do the work of triage for next steps: Which patients would be first for follow-up surgeries, which next, and so on.

And as he sat there, in the back of his mind, he says, he wondered how he – and the others – had been able to keep on through that terrible afternoon into the night.

His wondering circled back to Heartbreak Hill in the Marathon.

King says if you are a spectator on Commonwealth Avenue at Heartbreak Hill – the long hill leading to Boston College at the top, from which high perch participants still have almost six miles to run – you will see in the latter stages of the race plenty of people walking. If you ask them how they are doing, why they are walking, many of them might say they just have nothing left in the tank.

But then, an hour or so later, King reminds us, most of these same runners would be running, not walking, but running down Boylston Street to the finish line.

Dr. King says that this was very much his experience on April 15, 2013 as he and the other professionals did what they were trained to do for hour after hour, when they frequently felt – if they even allowed themselves to feel – that they had nothing left in the tank.

Well, the message for me both in the resilience and perseverance of the trauma teams as well as in the more mundane experience of runners on Heartbreak Hill is the same message when it comes to all manner of challenges we humans face: Deep down, built into our bones and our DNA by millions of years of evolution, is resilience, and often more than we might have imagined ourselves capable of having.

I don't know about you, but I find this immensely reassuring, a reminder that on one level, I may not have to do anything special or be anyone special in order to be able to meet life's unforeseen challenges. Because resilience is built in.

This said, it is also true that there are things we can do during the calmer periods of life to strengthen our resilience for when the time comes. The marathon is a pretty good example of and metaphor for this too.

For pure resilience will probably not get you up (or even to) Heartbreak Hill and eventually down Boylston Street if you haven't prepared ahead of time.

And preparation for the race – as for life – involves body/mind/spirit.

Body: That's the relatively easy part, following a training regimen of increasing running distance interspersed with enough rest and good diet; and of course exercise, rest, and diet are a good recipe for life resilience too.

Mind: More than a little harder, because the mind is, as that first reading reminded us, difficult to tame.

When it comes to a marathon, envisioning the race helps, envisioning yourself feeling strong particularly during the most challenging parts of the course, helps. Reminding yourself that a time will come in almost any race – and this surely applies to life generally too – when you will want to quit, when you will wonder what in the world you are doing this for... but in advance, telling yourself that when, probably not if, that time comes you will not quit.

Further, routine practices of calming the mind, whether through meditation or prayer, or just sitting quietly, can prepare us to stay calm and focused when the challenge arrives. In a race. In our lives.

Spirit: Returning to your heart's centeredness on the meaning of the race – or whatever you are engaged in. It might just be for the sense of achievement itself, which is certainly okay. For those running for a charity, it is also on behalf of the good cause and the good that the funds raised will help to accomplish, so a focus on something larger – which can help carry us along, again when we come to that time when we feel we have nothing left in the tank.

A footrace is of course a relatively trivial matter. But Victor Frankl's work *Man's Search for Meaning* reminds us that even in the midst of the most trying circumstances imaginable, Auschwitz, meaning has a critical role to play when it comes to resilience enough to survive. Speaking to his fellow prisoners...

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death.

Meaning – something larger than ourselves. Might be a great cause, or might simply and profoundly be another person dear to us.

In short, then, all of these reflections on body/mind/spirit preparation apply to just about every dimension of our lives, to the wide variety of challenges we may face in our lives.

In this regard, one of my mantras for living is that though care of body/mind/spirit actually *guarantees* nothing, it manifestly improves the odds: improves the odds on survival, even on thriving, in the midst of challenge. We *can* ahead of time improve the odds for when the challenge comes.

Because, as Wendell Berry affirmed in that wonderful poem we heard earlier: "what we need is here."

Here: In our own inner resources of strength and wisdom – body/mind/spirit.

Here: In the web of intimate relationships – whether spectators on Heartbreak Hill or dear family and friends in the midst of personal heartbreak – relationships, companionship, that will help to sustain us in the midst of... well, whatever. (And this is, after all, one of the reasons we choose to become part of a church community such as this, isn't it.)

Here: In the invisible yet, to me anyway, quite real resources, realities if you will, beyond our individual strength, beyond even our friends and community, the reality of the life force that wants us (if that's the right way of putting it) to be okay, to survive, to get through. Call this force Nature with a capital "N" or call it God, call it what you will.

Which returns me to what maybe is my primary point this morning, which is to affirm a sort of blessed mystery: that over and over again we see people "keeping on" in the face of illness, loss, challenge of all kinds – keeping on when they might never have imagined they could. Because it turns out there is maybe not always, but far more often than we might have thought, more in the tank. Somehow – blessed mystery – we intuitively know how to access that "more" body/mind/spirit when we need to.

There were, for example, times during the last months of my mother's life when I wondered how I kept going as the primary caregiver. But I did. Oh, I kept up the practical self-care of continued exercise and good diet, getting as much rest as I could, and I had huge support from my dearest ones. But there was also that blessed mystery of more. And maybe the name for that "more" is, quite simply, love.

How could I have been talking for all this time without mentioning love – love at the heart of the sense of meaning that carries us forward, keeps us going, in the midst of trying circumstances.

We can look not only in one another's faces and lives here to see this love carrying us through. Look in the eyes of refugees from Syria or Iraq or South Sudan... simply (!) trying their best to bring their families to safety.

We see love.

So when the Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg reflects on the need for self-care as essential to developing and sustaining resilience for anyone in a caregiving role, professionally or personally, she means self-*love* as essential to cultivating love and compassion for others. She writes:

Caregiving with resilience first depends on choosing to inhabit a world where we treat ourselves with love, where we know deeply and truly that compassion for ourselves is not weak or self-defeating or an excuse for surrender or passivity. Rather, it is a force that opens the door to a completely different way of relating to others and to our own experience so we constantly grow and change, and continue to serve.

Maybe all this is another way of saying that we improve the odds on our resilience by taking care of ourselves, which means by treating ourselves with love. Remember, western scripture affirms we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Finally I cannot conclude this morning without noting that however resilient we are by nature, and however much we strengthen our resilience through self care, self-love, of body/mind/spirit... there will be times we don't get through in one piece, there

will be outcomes we don't like at all, to put it mildly – whether a broken relationship or the death of a dear one or our own inevitable demise.

In other words, resilience as we usually would understand it has limits, just as our all too human lives have their limits.

This means that sometimes it is time to let go.

Let go of a dream, of a goal... of someone we love.

Yet as I think about this, it may be that this is not exactly about the end or failure of resilience, but about a larger realm or meaning of resilience. I don't want to push this point too far, for it is surely also about the reality that life is not always fair, that sometimes terrible things over which we have limited or no control happen and overtake us.

But even so... maybe it is at such a point that resilience takes on a different shade of meaning, maybe it is no longer about the resilience of this physical life or about the resilience of things keeping on as they have been. But it surely is or can be about the resilience of love – that word again, that underlying spirit which sustains us even in the midst of loss and failure as the world – and maybe we too – conventionally measure failure.

For love does abide, love in the midst of the very fragility of life, the uncertainty of outcomes. Love which, whatever other resources we cultivate in our lives, we can also cultivate throughout our lives.

It will come in handy, I do guarantee you that – manifestly improves the odds, love does, on living a more meaningful and resilient life in the midst of uncertainty, fragility, and challenge.

Though I expect you all know this quite well already.

So may it always be.