

“Joy and Resilience”

Olympia UU Congregation

February 2, 2020

Rev. Mary Gear

In April of 2015, two world leaders met in Dharamsala, India. Long-time friends, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, met for a week of dialogue, friendship and celebration. At the end of the week, they celebrated the 80th birthday of The Dalai Lama. Part of the record of this historic meeting is a book titled The Book of Joy, in which these moral and spiritual leaders address the question of how we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering.

Each of these men have experienced and encountered great suffering in their lives. As a young man, new to his position as the spiritual and political leader of his country, the Dalai Lama was driven into exile from his beloved homeland of Tibet. The Chinese government claims Tibet as part of China and so sent it's army to occupy the county. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet when he believed his life to be in danger. The Dalai Lama and another 100,000 Tibetans took refuge in India where they've been for 50 years, seeking to maintain their culture and identity.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an Anglican priest and the former Archbishop of South Africa, was and is an ardent activist for civil rights, especially for blacks in South Africa. He played an important role in drawing international attention to the violence of apartheid. In 1995, he was appointed to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which investigated human rights abuses during the apartheid era. In addition to his own experiences of oppression and violence, he and members of the Commission heard many horrifying stories of terror and violence as the realities of apartheid were confessed and shared.

And yet, despite the hardships they have experienced for themselves and their people, these two spiritual leaders are joyful, as described by the book's chronicler, Douglas Abrams. They enjoyed each others company, teasing and laughing, sharing jokes on themselves and each other. Their dialogue is an exploration of the importance and process of finding joy when life is hard. They would know.

Today we enter the month of February with an invitation to explore our spiritual theme of resilience.

As I reflected on the theme of resilience, in true Unitarian Universalist fashion, I found myself first noticing what resilience is not. (UUs often describe what we believe by first saying what we don't believe!) Resilience is not stubbornness or rigidity. Resilience is adaptability, flexibility, strength, and bending instead of breaking.

Resilience is not denial, looking away, refusing to see what may be difficult. Resilience means turning toward, facing reality as it is, an awareness of what is real. Resilience requires our attention.

And, resilience is not passive. In addition to our attention, resilience requires action, movement, and flow. I like this quote from artist Rob Grad:

The most delicate flower is still a badass, it sucks food from roots, stares at the sun and basks in it. It wrestles the wind, and drinks rain.

As our opening reading said, despite plenty of reasons to do otherwise, “you have persisted to claim a life of joy and justice.” Resilience requires action.

I found two different explanations of the origin of the word “resilience.” One suggests that resilience stems from the Latin *resilire*, which means “to rebound, recoil.” It is our ability to adapt during adversity, our ability to notice what is required of us and change when needed in order to move through the challenge. The rebound is a return a sense of wholeness and clarity we've been challenged.

In physics, resilience is described as the ability of an elastic material, such as rubber or the tissue of our bodies, to absorb energy, such as the energy from a blow, and then release that energy as the material springs back into shape.

The second definition suggests that resilience comes from two Latin words, *re-* meaning “back” and *saliens*, meaning “beginning or heart of.” This suggests an active effort to return to our heart, our essential self.

Combined, these definitions suggest that resilience is adapting and changing when we are challenged, drawing strength from returning to our heart, our essential self. Resilience is adapting and changing when we are challenged, drawing strength from returning to our heart. This sounds like a spiritual practice to me.

During their week together the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop agreed that “suffering is inevitable...but how we respond to that suffering is our choice. Not even oppression or occupation can take away this freedom to choose our response.” (p. 7) As with the travelers in our story today, what we expect and how we choose to respond to those we encounter affects the reaction we get in return. If we expect others to be unkind, selfish and without hope, it is likely that's what we will encounter. If we expect others to be amazing, generous and kind, it is likely that's what we'll encounter. We may not have control over what happens to us, but we have control over how we approach it and respond to it.

Some might suggest that the opposite of being fragile is being tough. The antidote to being fragile is being resilient. Resilience isn't putting up walls when we are challenged. It is having practices and disciplines to draw on. It means being aware of and understanding the challenge before us, having strong roots, drawing strength from those roots, then making a change in our attitude or actions, or both.

So, what is at our center and where we are rooted is important. The Dalai Lama and the Archbishop identified eight pillars of joy that they draw on and that can be cultivated to offer strength in times of challenge. The four pillars of the mind are perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance. Perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance.

Perspective is being able to step back and put what is happening in a larger context, taking a wider view across both space and time. It's moving beyond a focus on ourselves as an individual in this moment and seeing ourselves as part of the interdependent web that has a long history of facing adversity.

Humility is being able to admit that there is much we don't know and little that we can control. It's acknowledging that we are but part of the interdependent web.

Humor is being able to laugh, especially at ourselves, even in the face of challenges.

And, acceptance is facing what is, not denying or minimizing or ignoring what is real. Acceptance

doesn't mean that we like it or endorse it or agree with it. Acceptance isn't resignation or defeat, it is the opposite of these. Acceptance means that we let go of our attachment to the goal and method, facing what is with some equanimity. Only then can we make change in ourselves or in the world.

This reminds me of the serenity prayer written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and used by many 12 step groups:

Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And wisdom to know the difference.

The other four pillars of joy are related to the heart: forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. Forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. Forgiveness does not mean allowing wrongdoing or forgetting. It is the spiritual practice of freeing ourselves from the past, releasing the ties that can prevent healing and renewal.

Gratitude is a spiritual practice of being thankful.

Compassion is the practice of cultivating concern when confronted with the suffering of others and being motivated to see that suffering relieved.

Generosity is the practice of giving, in all the many that we can give. It is an ancient spiritual teaching that it is in giving that we receive.

Each of these pillars and practices helps build a sense of joy at our center, which we can draw on in times of difficulty. Each of these is a spiritual practice and a skill that can be learned. Often we learn them in times of challenge. I think it's good news that resilience can be learned.

On reflection, I realize that my maternal grandmother was an important model in my life for learning resilience. Granny was born in 1915, so experienced the Great Depression as a teenager and young adult. She lost her mother when she was a teenager and had a difficult relationship with her step-mother; to me her stories sounded like they were right out of the Grimm's fairy tales! The oldest of her siblings, she left school early to work, helping to support her family, and she worked outside of the home for most of her life. In the early 1940s she found herself divorced with a toddler, that was my mom, in a time when this was not common or very accepted. After she remarried she worked hard to support and raise her family, a skill that served her well when she was widowed young, in her 50's. She surrounded herself with friends, active in book groups and card groups, and a regular participant in her church. And, she danced whenever she could, enjoying dates at the Elks and Eagles clubs. She cultivated connections with others, relishing family and friends throughout her life.

Well before I knew the story of my Granny's life, I knew her to be accepting, generous and funny. Everyone was welcome in her home, greeted with a hug and a plate of food. She loved to tell jokes, especially bawdy jokes, she had quite a repertoire, and she laughed with abandon. I hear her cackle in the laughter of my mom and my aunt, and my husband says he hears her laugh in mine. I am grateful to have inherited her laugh, as well as some lessons of resilience. Although she faced many challenges in her life, Granny remained open, bending without breaking, drawing strength from her core values and religious belief. She cultivated joy through acceptance, generosity and humor. She met the world with an expectation of goodness, and often received the same in return.

One of the pivotal ways that Granny passed on her resilience to me happened when I was in college. I was being pestered for a date by a guy in my freshman Chemistry class. On a weekend when Granny was visiting, she heard this story and suggested that I consider accepting the invitation, that I be open to meeting someone new, despite a somewhat broken heart. “What have you got to lose?” she said. That guy has been my husband for almost 36 years. No doubt our lives would have been much different without Granny's encouragement to open up and bend just a little bit.

This past year has been a test of my resilience, and I have drawn on my Granny's wisdom often.

We are in a time of incredible change and challenge. I won't list of the changes and challenges for you; you each have your own list and you don't need to hear mine. Daily life can feel overwhelming, let alone any consideration of the future. I believe that we are being asked to learn some new skills and build our resilience skills. Robert Bly reminds us that we have an ancient child within in seeking to protect us by making us safe. That ancient voice tell us to be afraid: stay home, avoid elevators, eat only elk. It is a voice that has served us well for our survival, but it only has six big ideas and five of them won't work anymore. Operating from a place of fear causes us to hunker down, draw in, and build walls. We are being invited to create or recreate, more big ideas. Ideas like, the earth is alive, everything is connected, we need each other. Alone our voices feels tiny, but all together we make a mighty roar. Some new big ideas will help us not only survive, but thrive.

In their week together, the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop shared not only friendship, laughter and food, they shared their spiritual practices. The Dalai Lama invited the Archbishop into his meditation room where the remaining ancient texts of Tibetan Buddhism are kept. They shared a reading and a time of meditation together. The Archbishop offered communion to the Dalai Lama, a ancient ritual that includes images and passages from the Christian Bible. Each of these spiritual leaders has ancient practices that they draw on—ritual, reading, reflection, meditation, prayer. These are the practices that they have drawn on to face the challenges in their lives, practices that have made them strong and resilient. Practices that help them calm the voice of fear, see clearly what they are facing and dig deep to connect with their center of strength as they face it.

Their roots go down, down, down, down deep.

Ours can, too. Just like those delicate, badass flowers, we can draw food through our roots, stare at the sun, dance with the wind, and drink rain. We can draw spiritual sustenance for our hearts, minds and spirits so that we can be here for the long haul, showing up at the table again and again and again.

So, as we explore the theme of resilience this month, I invite you to ponder these questions:

Who taught you about resilience?

What new big ideas, resilience skills, are you being invited to learn?

What practices help you return to the heart of your soul and remember that your roots go deep?

Let us take a moment to turn our attention inward, listening for the voice of our heart. Settle into your seat. Breathe in. Breathe out. Let us share a time of silence together.

More about [The Book of Joy](#) [here](#).

Official music video of “Resilient” by Rising Appalachia [here](#).