

“Build it Before You Need It ”

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Centering Words

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In a book published a few years ago entitled *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*, writers Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy define resilience as the capacity of a system, enterprise or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances. They say if we can't control the volatile tides of change, we can at least learn to build better boats.

They point to things that are characteristics of that better boat, things like tight feedback systems—how to better know what's going on around us. Imagine a world full of sensors that gives us as much feedback as possible and therefore make it possible to adjust things as we go on. The writers also say we should strive to make systems that are as diversified as possible. If one part of the system fails are there others that can be adapted to keep things going? Are there networks of people who have as broad a range of skills as possible and therefore bring a variety of life experience that can be relied upon? If the system has a diversity of experience and awareness it is more likely to be able to adapt and to survive.

Reflection

Rev. Danielle Webber

Much of today's sermon is connected to this book by Zolli and Healy: *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back*. Written shortly after the global financial crash in 2008 and published in 2012, this is a book that attempts to describe the relationships and similarities between different resilient systems. There are descriptions of the resilience of coral reef, of tuberculosis, the meditating mind of a Buddhist Monk and city banks during a time of catastrophe – and it is the hope of Zolli and Healy to find commonalities in these systems to try and turn them into a “5 easy steps;” even though they know that 5 easy steps are never going to work for everything. Zolli highlights, in an interview on the podcast *On Being* with Krista Tippett – that 2 decades ago the world was amazed by the fact that everything was connected. That a butterfly could flap its wings in New Mexico and can cause a hurricane in China. And in an era where every butterfly is connected to every hurricane, how do we stop the flapping of those wings. As we continue to witness this Butterfly Effect we recognize all of our systems, ecological, economical, geo-political, climate and food security systems are connected to each other, in ways that cause very complex, highly un-predictable, non-linear outcomes. This is why we need to start studying

the realities, the patterns, the truths of Resilience, because we have to live in a world that is out of order.

But what system are we talking about? I think that the resilience that we need to focus on right now is how to create more resiliency in this church community for change to happen. Because I have already witness times in which this community, this system has resisted change. There have been one off comments about different things that have shifted. There have been full conversations about how things used to be different, and how new systems are inconvenient or obtrusive. There have been full committee meetings, and board meetings that have been dedicated about changing things, and which have led to some small increments of change, or no change at all, and there have a few meetings, both in small group discussion, and in large community meetings where huge decisions have been made, in hopes of forcing change, and looking for ways to step more fully into the shifts that are needed.

At the beginning of December I talked about a change theory called the Transtheoretical model. It has 6 different stages in its theory of change. People move through these stages in a somewhat spiralling circle stairwell – hopefully always moving upward, but repeating the lessons from the lower levels. The first stage is pre-contemplation – this is where there is no intention of changing a behaviour. Next we move to contemplation – we become aware a problem exists but we have no commitment to action. Preparation is the intention on taking actions to address the problem. Action is the active modification of the behaviour. Maintenance is sustained change, new behaviour replaces old behaviour, and the final stage is called termination – when there is zero temptation in returning to old habits. Do people remember this theory? This idea of shifting through change? I spoke about my own shifts of change in Administrative Tasks. We pondered where the church might be in it's own change process. Well it feels to me like the concepts of resilience that Zolli and Healy share fit into this change theory in an intriguing way. Transtheoretical Model talks about change as a mostly conscious, or observed idea. There is a knowing that is happening, an understanding of the possibilities, and the processes that are needed to move forward. Whereas resilience theory is the idea of managing after an unexpected change has been pushed upon a system. The example that I gave about change theory was my needing to make shifts in managing my administrative tasks. Trying to find some way to manage my to-do lists and figure out how to do future planning and strategizing.

Well an example of resilience theory that is offered in the book describes this:

“When Katrina hit the Gulf Coast people were out of their homes, their homes had been obliterated, there was no working electricity, people’s basic identifications had been washed away in the storm, they couldn’t even prove who they were. And without electricity there couldn’t be any banking. You couldn’t go to the ATM machine and take money out, because the electricity in the ATM wasn’t working. One of the things that people really needed was cash, they needed money. For Hancock bank dozens and dozens of their branches had been obliterated, knocked out and made inoperable. Nobody could prove that they were a customer of the bank, nobody had the credentials, nobody had the way of saying who they were and worse, even if they could, there was nobody on the bank side that could say “Yes, okay we can just turn the computer on and find out how much you have on deposit with us.” So what do you

do in that circumstance? The folks at Hancock did something really amazing, they went back and looked at their charter, and they saw that that charter was principally focused on serving their community, not on profits, and then they did something truly extraordinary. They decided to give a couple 100 dollars in cash to anybody who asked for it, I mean anybody, it didn't have to be a customer, of Hancock, but anybody who would sign a slip of paper with their name and their address and their social security number could get cash immediately from Hancock Bank. This is a profound act of generosity, and trust, right when the community is in its most vulnerable state. And here's what's amazing. Of the millions of dollars that they put out, they got 99% of it back, and then net assets at the bank then grew as people came back to repay, they opened new accounts, and the company thrives today, because they were able to look at their core principles in a moment of significant disruption. And stay true to what had been true about them their values for the last century. Even though they had radically shifted how they operated in a moment of vulnerability and shock and disruption."

So, a couple of comments to start off with. I am not here to celebrate the bank's decision of handing out money – I don't think it is amazing, or generous, or an act of trust. I think that it was what they should have done, and they shouldn't have expected repayment, perhaps it should be the banks that are struggling with the continued aftermath of all hurricane Katrina, and not all of the families that are still reeling from its effects. Also this is an incredibly radical change. Which might make it easier to understand the difference between change theory and resilience theory, or it might make the waters murkier. But I think one of the more important things to notice here, besides the scale of the change, is where the change is coming from – is it something we have chosen by ourselves, like me and my change in administrative skills, or is it change that is thrust upon us, from an outside force. Because I don't believe we are going to be making change on such a scale as large as Hurricane Katrina, but there might be change that is coming at you from outside your control. And the 6 steps of change will likely not help with large scale changes, but it might also not work when we are being forced to change, or when change is happening and we don't realize it is. Just as a recap our 6 steps of change theory are: Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance, and termination.

So the premises of a resilient communities, or resiliency are:

- Failing Gracefully, which is to say a system that can reorganize when something fails, and it won't take down the entire system.
- The ability to move at more than one speed – so you have some people paying attention to the here and the now, but you also have people paying attention to the long game
- Build them before you need them: this is the idea of being for-thinking about where you want to be. If we hope to create a large children's program, then we need to hire someone who is capable of supporting and growing the program.
- Rooted in an initial act of generosity: the premise that you invite someone into a community and you give to them before you expect anything from them. Andrew Zollie said something fun about this "Otherwise you're just inviting people over to paint your house and do your homework, and that's usually no fun."

So these are the premises of a resilient community – to fail gracefully, the ability to move at more than one speed, to build it before you need it, and rooted in an initial act of generosity.

As we continue to work towards change in our church community, growing a community – figuring out how to make it sustainable, and resilient takes a lot of work. Just as Werner Herzog stated in our opening words: In Greece, ordinary white houses are repainted every year. Today we are often told to use materials and structures that are free of maintenance. But no building can be neglected entirely. We need constantly to renew our relationships — to the houses we live in, to our friends, to our own bodies — all the time, every day. Our church community is the same – we constantly need to renew our relationships to it, and we need to renew our understanding of what a resiliency for this community means. These are questions that the leadership has begun asking, and will continue to ask, as new leaders are joining in the official ranks of the Board of Directors later today.

We are trying to figure out what it means to fail gracefully – what parts of our community/ our system can fail, and will not take down the rest of the system. Or how do we build up our system so that when individual pieces, or people take time away there is still a strong fully functioning community. This has been a provoking question for me, as I witness what it means for this community to not have a paid person in charge religious education.

We have begun the conversation of working at different speeds, and the board has agreed to have 2 separate meetings each month, one that will be focusing on the decisions that require immediate attention, and the other that is focusing on the future, more long-term understanding of our community.

We have also talked about what it means to build it before we need it, this has been most clearly expressed in our search for a children’s program coordinator, but the Leadership has also been discussing other areas of our community, such as offering full services in the summer, and not just summer circles. Or building up the policies and practices to help with the organizational growth, which will help us grow in people as well.

Being rooted in initial act of generosity has become a new idea for me, and yet an old idea too, framed in a new way. It makes sense to me that you never ask a new person in a community into a volunteering position. This was made very clear to me at the Toronto congregation – where the Director of Lifespan Learning had a very clear rule that stated parents of new families were not allowed to volunteer in the Religious Education classes, until their child was enrolled in their second year. She stated that it was because she wanted the parents to have their own grounding in Unitarian Universalism before they started facilitating classes. But put a different way it was offering the gift of community to the parents, the gift of an hour without their children once a week, the gift of offering spiritual sustenance to the parents before asking them to support the children’s program. I wonder how well we are doing with this practice. Because the opposite of this idea of volunteering is also true, that if people are not asked to participate in the building of a community they might not feel as if they fit. Are we initiating our new relationships with generosity?

These are all incredibly important aspects to be paying attention to, as we continue to move down this path of growth and change. Trying to find the stages of change we are in, and recognizing if our practices lead to resiliency or not. I am going to be keeping an eye on these different areas, and I hope you will as well!