

“Personal Resilience”

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Reflection

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To pull oneself up by their bootstraps. This is a very common turn of phrase in the world today. Often referring to the ideas of succeeding only by one's own efforts or abilities. Or to recover from a setback without any outside help. It is used to suggest that people who are down and out shouldn't need the support of those around them to cope or survive. For example, people who are poor, and the greater population should not have to pay taxes to support them. Or when someone has been successful in their careers, and moved to the top of a corporate ladder, they have bootstrapped themselves. It is also a common term for the more current “gig” economy – or the concept that individuals are independent, contract, online workers – due to the fact that one income is not sufficient enough to support themselves. But where did this term come from, and is our understanding of it accurate.

The term is very old, and is attributed to a set of fictional stories written in 1780. *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, in which the main character attempts to claim that he pulled himself out of a swamp by grabbing his bootstraps and yanking. At the time of the stories it was presumed that Baron Munchausen was claiming a ludicrously far-fetched or even impossible task. Interestingly this name Munchausen is also where the term Munchausen Syndrome comes from – more appropriately named Factitious Disorder, in which a patient feigns illness, either due to emotional or mental illness.

So how did we get from the idea that pulling oneself up by the bootstraps was a ludicrous idea, and even suggesting the possibility of the individual lying about their situation, to a concept of enterprise, recovery and individual success? Somewhere along the way we shifted from a sense of collaboration and connection, evident by the ridiculousness of going it alone and pulling oneself out of a swamp by bootstraps → to a community of individualism, self-sufficiency and dare I say isolation.

On Friday night there was a group of us here in the sanctuary that watched the video of my Ordination Ceremony from last October. At the beginning of the service we had a land acknowledgement from two indigenous women that I worked with in 2013-2016. Kate offered a welcome to the land where we were. Kate told those gathered in Calgary about the people who lived there, before the settlers came, talking about the Pikani, Kiani, Siksika and Denee peoples. One thing that she said that was so profound to me was this “You need lots and lots of people to help survive in this traditional territory, there is not a lot of wood, and you have to travel far to get resources.” This was something that I knew, and yet it was a new way of knowing for me. A recognition that indigenous peoples in other territories might live in small family groupings, but in the Prairies large groups of people stayed together to help one another survive.

Similar to this, I remember a story that my grandfather told me about growing up in southern Manitoba in the 40s and 50s. He was a farm boy, my great-grandfather farmed grain and my great grandmother kept a vegetable garden, (or I suppose now a days what would be considered a small farm, seeing as how they had enough garden plots to feed their family of 8 kids and 2 parents all the vegetables they would eat throughout the winter.) And they also kept some animals, chickens mostly for their eggs, and cows, both for milk and meat. My grandpa told me that they belonged to a cattle share with neighbouring farms. Meaning that each month one of the farms would donate a cow to be killed and butchered so that all 6 families would be able to eat for 2 months, and then the next family would offer the same. In this way each family would only have to share one animal, but would be fed all year round.

There was recognition, not only in my grandfather's time, and in a time before Europeans made it to Turtle Island, what is now called North America, that supporting one another was the only way we were able to survive, let alone just be resilient, but to actually survive the cruelties of this land, and the necessities of being human. Somewhere along the way we were separated from this idea of communities offering more substantial support to its members.

I have talked here before about my idea of the Divine, my idea of the sacred, or even God is our relationships. The connections that hold one to another, knitting us together in the fabric of this world, this for me is the divine that needs to be witnessed, and worshiped. And this idea is expressed, and perhaps more wholesomely described by philosopher and Theologian Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman. "In his book *Man's Ultimate Commitment* Henry Nelson Wieman suggests that we have a need in our lives to achieve the infinite potentialities present in us at birth. He stresses the importance of our commitment to a life-long process that enables us to live our lives to the fullest. In order to obtain the Greatest Human Good one has to commit to live Creative Interchange from within. This special human interchange, that Henry Nelson Wieman coined Creative Interchange, is our ability to learn what others have learned, to appreciate what others appreciate, to feel what others feel, imagine what others imagine and to creatively integrate all this within what we have already acquitted and form this way our true individuality." Described a different way, creative interchange is experience, the kind of experience that transforms us in ways in which we cannot transform ourselves. As we meet in shared experience, we become more fully human in ways in which we can never predict, or bring about by striving to do so.

If we attempt to extrapolate this idea of creative interchange, a practice of becoming more fully human in ways that we could not have done so by ourselves alone, and combined it with this notion of cooperation, collaboration and connection to the people surrounding us, then it would seem that we need one another more than ever for our resiliency. Our need to rely on one another is not only tied up with our survival on the harsh prairie lands, hundreds of years ago, before modern technologies and infrastructure was developed. Nor is it tied up in the farming life of the first half of the 20th century. But it is also wrapped up in our spiritual resilience. An integration of our experiences with others is the only way in which we are going to become more fully human. For me, a faith community, a Unitarian Universalist church

encompasses many of the needs for human life. It gives us the space to question, struggle and perhaps come to an understanding of theological question, or perhaps we could call them “the big questions in life.” A faith community should allow us a space to care for and to be cared for, not only in our moments of sorrow, pain, struggle and strife, but also in the moments of joy, celebration, achievements and peace. Being part of a community that cares means that you are witnessed as you go through the rollercoaster of life. It also means that there is a community of people who we can discern about our commitments with. Discovering what ethical, spiritual, financial and relational commitments are appropriate for us. And we are able to discover what issues in the world are worthy of our energy. Working for justice, perhaps fighting for justice, realizing injustice and learning about others opinions of justice - is all made easier when a community struggled with the Big Questions, have cared for one another and discovered what their commitments are.

When I dream of a belonging to a community, this is what I think of. A place where I can seek and share my views, to struggle and discern with what I believe is right, good, wrong, real, necessary or possible. There are people who will care for me, and I for them, we will celebrate one another and offer solace when it is needed. I will look to those in my community to help me discover what to commit to. To figure out where my resources or energy, time, finances, and talents should be put. And I will discover who and what I care about in the greater community, and in our world. I do not look to be guided through my community life, but I want to be encouraged to ask, ponder and choose my path, and I would hope that a community, a faith community would help me be responsible to those decisions.

Perhaps we cannot know personal resilience until we belong to a community that helps us to find our strengths, determine what to do with our resources, discover what we believe, and to figure out our path. Maybe it is, as Jill Suttie suggests, that we cannot know personal resilience until we have a social support around us, be that the personal relationships that we have with one another, or the social safety nets that support us, like health care, and parental leave.

I think it is foolish to believe that we can get through life all by ourselves. It seems as ridiculous as being able to pull myself out of a swamp by yanking on my boot straps. We all require the support of people to make it through our life. Whether it is the farmers who grow your food, the bus or taxi driver getting you to your next destination, or the people you invite round your dinner table for a celebration meal, we need one another to survive, we need one another to thrive, we need one another to help achieve a resilient spiritual life.

Of course we are always going to have nay-sayers. Just like the robins in our story this morning, there are always going to be people who will tell you that you are not capable, or that there is no point in trying. Or sometimes when we reach out to those who we are in connection to, we feel a sense of shame, a neediness, an inner struggle with our own worthiness. But maybe that’s how we got into this mess. What would it look like if we allowed ourselves to keep coming back and asking for advice. If we were to listen to the people in our world who acted more like Frog, with encouragement, suggestions on shifting, or adding more creative ideas. Perhaps we can learn to fly.