

Riding the Waves

Christine Robinson

Ten adults face a layoff, a messy divorce, a big mistake, serious health problems, etc. You know, all the stuff of life that launches any of us into unwelcome, uncomfortable, inevitable change. Three of those adults sail through, seemingly without much distress, and quickly remake their lives. Five endure a period of misery and difficulty, find their balance and energy on some new life path, learn, grow, and recover with new insights. One takes longer and needs more help, but also finally emerges from the times of trial. One never really recovers.

Ten congregations confront a problem—a change in ministers, building demands, budget deficits, employee issues, a predator among the people, a leaking roof, a beloved elder enveloped in scandal, or perhaps a dreary season of deaths. Some members organize with gusto to do what needs to be done. Some become mired in controversy and blame, gossip and meanness, and don't really ever solve the problem. Some lose heart completely and never recover.

The differences between these ten people or congregations probably don't have much to do with the degree of disruption from change, or how devastating the mistake, how serious the illness, how big the deficit or how difficult the loss. The difference between those who thrive after difficult, unwelcome changes and those who continue to struggle has much more to do with that illusive quality called resilience, a combination of personal maturity, an outlook on life, and a set of skills and experiences which can be brought into difficult situations.

More than a few of us have been catapulted into an unwelcome, uncomfortable time of change by economic conditions and/or the challenges we experience as our health shifts, as we and our parents grow older, as children and spouses and relationships endure difficulties. Our lives are a succession of changes, incremental and disruptive, happy and miserable, and we have to cope, learn, adapt, and let go—over and over and over.

Nor do those changes come politely at the predictable and manageable rate of, say, one per year, but rather pile up on each other quite unfairly. In spite of that, most of us manage to scrape up enough resilience to deal with many demanding dynamics more or less as they come. In the end, you don't get out of childhood without developing a fair number of the skills of resilience. Every single one of us is a monument to the human ability to cope with change, tragedy, social ills, crisis, growth, aging, happiness, grief, turns of fortune and a host of other challenges. You are a resilient person.

But you may not feel resilient enough—enough to cope with aging and family changes and an uncertain economy, for instance. Or you may not feel resilient enough to handle the demands of changing job circumstances year after year. Or you may wonder if you are resilient enough to go to memorial service after memorial service as friends and loved ones die. You may wonder how to guarantee that you'll bounce back from health problems or relationship changes or just the normal slings and arrows of life. You may be aware of how much you have weathered but wonder what is in store for the future.

And you'd be right to wonder. We can pretty much guarantee that much is in store for the future—yours and everyone else's. As the poet Donald C. Babcock suggests, we're all like ducks on the heaving Atlantic, and while we can smooth our feathers to keep them in top condition, and peer at the sky to discern changes in the weather, mostly we ride waves which we only partly understand, buoyed by forces we can feel but not control. And mostly, we enjoy the ride anyway.

But there are things we can do and ways we can live to enhance our resilience—our ability to bounce back after disruptions and adjust to change. There are things we can do to be of assistance to others and ways we can help the children in our care to develop their ability to bounce back. There are qualities of group life, too, that enhance resilience, such as open communication, steady leadership, well-articulated goals, care for individuals and attention to mission, congruence between authority and responsibility, that sort of thing. Such shared habits are a kind of basic hygiene that can help communities stay strong and elastic.

The equivalent for individuals includes things you've heard about many times—the basic hygiene of good mental and physical health. It's about eating well, exercising and getting your check-ups; about getting out in nature, tending to our spiritual lives; about developing networks of family, friends, and community.

We all know these things and we relearn how important they are with every crisis in our lives. But it is so easy, when things are going well, to get too busy to do this work. Often people say—when they get to the other side of a crisis—that the silver lining in that cloud was how they were reminded about the importance of those resilience-building practices.

An important part of our ability to recover from extreme change or stress is the community that enfolds us. That points to one of the reasons World War II vets seemed to do better as a group reintegrating to civilian life than Viet Nam War vets. WW II vets returned to a society that was in a healthier place, where their experiences were honored, where wartime sacrifices had been

widely shared, including by civilians, and where there were resources available to re-tool their lives.

In contrast, Viet Nam vets returned to significant chaos, lack of recognition (even at times a sense of being shamed) and disruptive inflation. They were surrounded by things that were out of their control. If they also struggled with chaotic families, were not inclined to become a part of a religious or civic community, or had no friends, their innate resilience was often overcome.

There's another aspect to the issue of how relationships affect resilience. Researchers who work with children who grew up in situations of significant social distress suggest that the one kid on the block who goes off to college and makes a major success of herself had something that the other kids, for whatever reason, didn't have. She had someone in her life who gave her the message that she was special, loved, or gifted. This someone was usually not a parent.

They studied a group of kids whose circumstances tended to include parents who were too beaten down to pay them much attention. The person who made a kid feel like their life was worth something was often a teacher, a neighbor, a coach, or a more distant relative like an aunt or grandfather. That is to say, it was somebody like you and me. Just tuck away that possibility as you go about your business. It probably doesn't just apply to kids. Somebody around you may need to know that they are special and worthy, and with a little caring attention you might just make a real impact on their life.

Another point worth noting is that the kids from these challenging situations who thrived seemed to be able to collect sponsors. They knew how to ask for help, how much help they could appropriately ask for, and how to express gratitude for that help. Therefore, people reached out to them and gave them that extra helping hand.

I see this "sponsor effect" at work all around me, not just in young people, and in folks whose challenges are very ordinary. There are some people who get all the help they need and who leave those who help them feeling glad they did. There are skills involved in this kind of outreach, skills we should cultivate in ourselves and which we can help our children acquire.

But asking for help is hard for many of us. We UU's tend to be "rugged individualist" types. The same values that sent some of us out of our childhood faiths looking for religious answers that made more sense to us also tend to make us pretty resistant to accepting help or trying out others' answers for ourselves. We are often willing to offer our shoulder for others to cry on, but are much less willing to be seen at our most discouraged. However, we are more resilient in

the long run if we find appropriate ways to ask for the help we all need. When our kids see us doing this it is easier for them to catch on to this life skill as well.

Another thing that researchers have learned about resilient people is that their lives are authentic to their innermost values. When we're not authentic we have an especially hard time with change and crisis because we have to manage both our real feelings and the mask we project to the world. Institutions true to their core mission are much more resilient than those that have drifted away from their purpose, which is all too common.

I got an email recently from a colleague who has gone into search for a new congregation because the one she currently serves, much as she loves them, is "more interested in curating their past than living their present or their future." Curating the past might be an appropriate mission for a history museum, but it will weaken a church because it is so far from what a church is really for.

People and institutions whose energy is inordinately invested in things outside of themselves—like their authority, status symbols, physical appearance or buildings—have a harder time dealing with life's blows than those who know themselves to be inwardly sturdy, persons of integrity or loving communities. Those qualities are much less subject to the erosions of life than automobiles, jobs or physical beauty.

The ability to think for oneself, to reflect independently, to go against the crowd when necessary is often a part of resilience. The duck who thinks he's a swan has a much more difficult time balancing in the waves than a duck who knows he's a duck.

Nardini survived a Japanese concentration camp, and went on to become a psychiatrist. He remembers observing that a significant part of the ability to survive the terrible conditions prisoners of war faced was the ability to separate themselves from their surroundings, to hold on to a belief that they were better than their circumstances suggested. "They can treat us like animals, but that doesn't make us animals," someone told him. Of course it is true, and those who can hold that kind of thought do better in adversity than those whose sense of self melts into the background abuse more easily.

In the final analysis, those who know deeply who they are also know that they remain that person no matter what the circumstances of their lives.

Resilient people are willing to learn from their problems, crises, and mistakes, and that learning not only enhances their life's skill set, it gives any predicament a positive place in their life's

story. The person who can say, “I went to prison but I learned a market-able skill” or “My partner left me and I was forced to realize how selfish I had been, and why”—that’s a person who has not only stayed afloat in a storm, but has learned to swim.

Our resilience is also related to some of our core beliefs about life. For instance, those who believe that good people are rewarded with riches are in for an especially hard time when things don’t go well for them economically. Not only do they have to pinch pennies, they also have to ask themselves what they did wrong to deserve this downturn. It doubles the pain, and sorting out one’s theology as well as one’s finances can take a long time. It’s much better, in good times and in bad, to cultivate a sense of gratitude for what we have and confidence in our ability to manage whatever comes.

Finally, resilience is related to having a purpose beyond one’s self and a large enough view of life to see one’s situation fitting into a larger scheme. Cultivating those two items are the tasks of one’s spiritual life, and we UUs have a variety of ways of doing that. You might think about the spiritual life as rooted in being a child of God or the universe, or as springing from being a part of the human race, each member with inherent worth and dignity. You might think of your great purpose as growing in love and service, or raising a child, or adding to the store of human knowledge.

However you conceive of life’s purpose, your beliefs and intentional living are important to your resilience. Worship, meditation, prayer, and reflection are practices that help us honor our strivings while recognizing that our ultimate values are not at risk. This may be, most of all, what helps us recover from the large outrages and little blows to our hopes and intentions that seem to come with life.

You were born to live. You came out of this world and into this world to enjoy creation and contribute to it.

If you were raised in a Unitarian Universalist home, perhaps you were dedicated to a life of love and service for and among your fellow human beings. If you weren’t, perhaps you’d like to adopt that dedication anyway, as one set of watchwords for life on the heaving ocean.

You may ask the goddess for the serenity to accept the things you cannot change; you may look to the example of Jesus for the courage to change the things you can; you may simply rely on accumulated human wisdom for the cues you need to discern the difference. But attention to that spiritual part of your life and its meaning is vital to your resilience.

Even if you feel presently battered by some storm, you have ridden the waves of life successfully, resiliently. With a little help from our friends, our faith, and our basic habits of self-care, with the discipline to live out our values, ask for help when we need it and tend to our communities and relationships, we mostly manage to be resilient enough to ride even the big waves of change that are part of every life.

If we are wise and lucky we'll also notice the glory of the storm and enjoy the thrill of the ride, and know ourselves finally safe in the boundless and beautiful sea.



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Christine Robinson has just retired from her 39 year position as the senior minister of First Unitarian in Albuquerque, and now consults with large congregations. The Albuquerque kept her busy for all those years by outgrowing its buildings, programs, and governance structures, but she's also the proud mom of a successfully launched young adult, caregiver for two 90 year old parents, and one of the authors of three books of reflections to seed small group spiritual discussion, Heart to Heart, Soul to Soul, and Listening Hearts. She's passionate about finding authentically UU expressions of spirituality into our worship, family, and individual lives.

She stays in touch with the world and her body through gardening, and a Kung Fu practice.