

Resilience

A Sermon Preached for the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church
Colorado Springs, CO via Zoom
by Christine Robinson August 22, 2021

Reading: Mornings At Blackwater by Mary Oliver

This morning I want to talk about resilience, which is a physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual skill that allows us to keep on keeping on...living our life fully through all of the changes, disasters, stresses, illnesses, and losses of our lives. We've had more than our share, lately. The past two years have been, it seems, just one thing after another; pandemic, politics, police, storms and fires, lies and insurrection, and then, more pandemic, more lies, more fires. The inability of our fellow Americans to do what is right for themselves and their neighbors and their nation by getting a couple of shots and maybe feeling poorly for a day feels like a terrible predictor of our future society and world.

But...here I am. And here you are. Worshiping together on a platform most of us had not even heard of and would have rejected as a poor substitute if we had been asked, two years ago. And I hope, that in spite of all the bad news, the conflicting advice, and the privations, you realize just how ...resilient you have been! Being resilient doesn't mean being upbeat and ready for anything with a smile, all the time. Not at all! It means, coping, most of the time, and sometimes while fighting a bad mood, but still living, growing, learning.

A year ago May, just as we started to realize just how long and slow "ending the crisis" was going to be, and I started wondering how much resilience I had to cope with it all, my dog Mosby had a crisis, and I got to watch how he coped. I was inspired, and I want to share his story and the things he reminded me of, with you.

So. This is Mosby. Isn't he cute? And.... notice the attitude? Mosby thinks his job in life is to protect his family from all threats. For instance, pickup trucks, skateboards, bicycles, and especially any member of that extremely dangerous species Canine. It makes peaceable walks a challenge! So, we walk him in the early morning and installed a doggie door for him so



he can have quality outside time in the safety and privacy of our small, walled back yard.

One morning, I discovered him in our nice safe back yard with blood all over his face. The vet said it was probably a racoon he had tangled with, and she commented that he was lucky to have come out of it with just a slashed face. She brought him back to me with a cleaned-up face, antibiotics, and a cone. Want to see?



Aw, poor Mosby. All he was doing was protecting his family.

I'd heard plenty of jokes about dogs and cones, but watching a dog get accustomed to a cone, ...it's pathetic.

They bump into everything...which jerks their head.

They have to learn how to get at their food and water

they can't use their doggie door, can't groom themselves, or scratch their ears.

They can go on walks but their senses of

sight, hearing, and smell are all changed.

And if they are a dog of short stature, their little necks get tired...but if they droop even a little, their cone catches on the ground and trips them up.

A cone, in other words, is a major adversity for a dog, totally puts masks to shame, and well worth all the anger and frustration Mosby could throw at it. Which he did at first. He tried over and over to escape all these changes by charging out hisnow too small....doggie door. (Doggie Denial) He growled at us when we tried to help. (Doggie Displaced Anger). He curled up in his bed and stared at us with his big eyes. (Doggie Depression). Denial, Displaced Anger, and Depression are three enemies of resilience, and I bet they sound familiar!

Oh, gosh, we felt for him! We pampered him and fed him his favorite fancy food from a spoon while he alternately moped and tried and failed to do things the old ways. Poor little guy! Lots of changes to cope with, lots of learning to do, and his nose probably hurt too. We went to bed with heavy hearts that night!

But the next morning, cone and all, Mosby was ready for his walk. Insistent even. So I leashed him up and off we went. And from that moment on, in spite of all the bumps and annoyances, the changes and the aggravations, which went on for a week, Mosby by gosh led his life. He's fine now.



Material objects...like elastic, show resilience when they snap back to their original shape after they have been stressed by stretching. This is simple resilience and it is very important! A few weeks back, when I hauled out the cloth masks I'd stashed away, that their elastic, which was very resilient during Pandemic Phase One, was, well, flabby. I could relate. I did not feel quite as snappy about starting in with the masks again, either! However, with no resilience, the old elastic just wasn't doing the job anymore. After a few days of procrastinating, due to lack of my own snap-back, I made some new ones.

Living beings are more complex than elastic bands, of course, and snap back isn't all there is to resilience. In our case, resilience is not just going back to the old normal, it is learning to cope with the new normal. Mosby's resilience showed, not only when he got his physical energy back and his face began to heal, but when he learned new things...

- To manipulate his cone so he could get at his food and water bowls.
- to not try to go out his doggie door,
- to let me know he wanted me to let him out or scratch his ears.

We know we are showing resilience in the face of adversity when we are learning...learning about the new situation and its demands, learning the new skills we need to cope, or learning how to keep up our spirits in hard times. What did you learn during the pandemic? Most of you learned to Zoom! That is resilience.

Here's another way Mosby showed resilience. In spite of what must have been a sudden, baffling, and very annoying set of changes in his life, he went right on living it. Eager for his walk in spite of not being able to hear or see quite right, eager for his food even if he had to re learn how to get to it, eager for affection and even eager to get out in the back yard and bark at his neighbor canines.

Of course, Mosby is a dog. And dogs specialize in living in the moment. They do not tax themselves with worries about things to come, or how things have changed, or how they are going to live. One of the ongoing spiritual lessons of our pets is observing this wholehearted way of living. We humans don't come to that naturally. What we come to naturally is anxiety, worry about what might happen next, anger about what should be and isn't, and dissatisfaction about what is. That inner restlessness and ability to plan...that sort of the essence of who we are, uncomfortable as it is! That's what sets us apart from the dogs, and why the dogs rely on us totally to shop for their food and get them to the vet and stay stocked up with poop bags, right? It's our real purpose in life, along with scratching their ears. It's what we are good at.

But if anticipating, worrying, and being dissatisfied is the ONLY thing we are good at, we may have a lot of purpose, but we will have precious little joy. We have to learn, then, to be like our dogs. We need poets to remind us, as Mary Oliver does, that, the past is the past, and the present is what your life is.. So come to the pond, or the river of your imagination, or the harbor of your longing, and put your lips to the world. And live your life.¹

How did you live your life during Pandemic Phase I? I myself reverted to type it seems! I took a gig doing regular virtual preaching, first for a congregation in Philly, now, here in Colorado Springs. But, I also tried out personal training, as an alternative to the group exercise I had heretofore found worked best for me And I became addicted to jigsaw puzzles. You have to be living in the moment to focus your mind on those tiny pieces! Last Spring I worked as a volunteer usher at one of the vaccination centers. What fun that was! Well, I bet you did that sort of thing. You lived your life in spite of masks and lock downs, worries and unwelcome restrictions. You lived your life! Your dog would be so proud!

Most of you have been through plenty in your lives....crisis, change, illness, relationship and work issues, a firing, addiction issues, and you've learned a thing or two! And you know that your ancestors went through much worse, survived, and passed some good genes down to you. So let's ask ourselves how we can nurture that resilience...so that we can move on in good health from COVID19 and be better prepared for what comes next in our lives.

Now my Mosby didn't give a thought to how he could increase his resilience! That's a very, well...human question to ask. But...let's ask it!

To be resilient, you need some basic habits of mental and physical health. You know...enough sleep, exercise, good food, social interaction, care with the chemicals we so easily become dependent on. You need to go on your morning walk every day...or

¹ All We Can Save (p. 348). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

whatever your version of exercise is. If you are a little Yorkie who must suddenly carry around a great big cone, it is good to start with a strong neck...even if it now has to get stronger. So....take care of your health, physical and mental.

The second set of habits that promote resilience are habits of clear, logical thinking as well as heart-felt emotional intelligence. It's hard to bounce back when you indulge in fuzzy cognition...from wishful thinking, conspiracy theories, to denial and willful cluelessness. Fuzzy thinking, I'm afraid, is more endemic than the pandemic these days and that means that our own individual, group, and political good thinking is all the more critical. So, resilience means checking our facts, remembering our logic, knowing the ways we are likely to try to kid ourselves, and conversing with others who look to finding truth over being doctrinaire. Yeah, Unitarian Universalists!

Mosby's first reaction to his cone was to go on as if nothing had changed. Denial. It is one of the most powerful kinds of human fuzzy thinking. In denial mode, he tried repeatedly to escape out his doggie door, now too small for his increased diameter, with painful results. He was in no mood to pay attention to me, either, although I could have helped. Thinking he knows it all is a persistent cognitive bias of his of which, I'm sorry to say, he is completely unaware. You are smarter than that, right? Wisdom is knowing what you don't know and getting help when you need it. Intellectual honesty and facing the facts is, in the end, the key to finding solutions and learning what we need to learn in a new or stressful situation.

That's no fun....just necessary. Being resilient, you see, doesn't mean you will feel great all the time. It means you will be able to tolerate, learn, and grow, in spite of feeling bad. Want to hear that again? Being resilient does not mean you will feel great all the time. It means you will be able to tolerate, learn, and grow, despite feeling bad. While your nose still hurts and your ears don't seem to work and you have maneuver a strange new obstacle to get to your own water dish, the way to keep your spirits up as well as to master your new situation, is to learn something. Figure it out. Make something work.

Our nation has shown itself to be unable to feel bad, and its people have indulged themselves in all sorts of unproductive behavior. I am inclined to think, frankly, that all of the conspiracy theories and misinformation are being snapped up, not because people are stupid, but because they can't stand to feel bad any more and need justification for going on with their life. It's a particularly dangerous form of denial, allowing people to discount risks because they couldn't stand feeling bad one more day. Not knowing how to cope when you feel bad is a problem, and that's one thing we could be learning in this crisis...or in any crisis. And that is a matter of attending to our spiritual life.

We UU's use the word "spiritual" very broadly; here's one definition. The spiritual part of our lives is our attention to meaning and cultivating a sense of mental and emotional calm.

So if somebody had clapped MY head in a cone and wouldn't take it off, I would not be a happy camper. I would be...disabled and that would take adjusting to. Pain and Problem! Mosby would understand. But if I wasn't careful, I'd add to my own pain and problems with my undisciplined mind. "How dare they!" I might say to myself. "This is so unfair." "I must have done something wrong to deserve this." "What's wrong with me!". Mosby knows nothing of such self-talk, but I do...and you probably do, too. I have had to practice shutting down such talk, or talking back to it, which I learned to do in meditation and in therapy. I'm still subject to all the painful disappointments, disabilities, and changes that we all are, but I work at not making them worse, by cultivating calm and reminding myself not to believe everything I find myself thinking!

And I pay attention to the things that give meaning to my life and try to live out what I think of as my purpose. I'm more complicated than my little dog, of course, who is not able to sooth is cone sufferings by remembering that he got them doing what the thinks of as his duty. But I can remember that...and believe, me, during the week that I was up and down letting him in and out of the back yard, scratching his ears, and giving him his pills, I reminded myself that he got into this condition earnestly...if misguidedly... protecting me from a predator who could have easily been three times his size. Remembering that love and meaning was an important part of MY spiritual life that week, as I remembered what is important to me.

What's your end in life right now? Mine is to continue to be of service, and to keep in touch, virtually, if necessary, with my friends and loved ones. Hence, a little work, some computer gaming with my siblings and our children, some volunteer work for the city, another puzzle exchange...let me know if you want in on that, and living as lightly on the earth as I can. What are your goals and ends? Mosby suffered unnecessarily because he couldn't remember that he got his cone trying to protect his family. No need for you to suffer that way!

By the way, institutions, societies, and nations also experience resilience, and because they are made up of people, their resilience resembles the human kind; it is not only a matter of bouncing back, but of learning, growing, and developing greater ability to face the future effectively. So a resilient congregation, in these COVID Phase 2 days, for instance, would be a congregation that was not clamoring to go back to the way things used but rather is a congregation asking, "What have we learned? Who can we serve now? What is the purpose of this congregation and how can we fulfill it in current conditions? I How do we keep the doors open in these strange days? I know that you are that kind of congregation, and I honor you for that.

And I honor each of you! So far in your lives, each and every one of you...even those of you who feel very battered right now, have ridden the waves of life successfully, resiliently. With a little help from friends, faith, and our basic habits of self-care, in part because we discipline ourselves to live out our values, think clearly, and to cultivate peace in our minds

and hearts so that we don't make feeling bad any worse than it is, we mostly manage to be resilient enough to ride even the big waves of change which are a part of all that is our life. Blessings in this hard time. May you use this time resiliently: to heal, to learn, and to grow in wisdom and in spirit.