

How Do We Bounce?

Theodore Parker Church

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Offering

The mystic, Dame Julian of Norwich, lived in the 1300's – through the Black Death plague and the Peasants' Revolt. She became an anchorite, living in seclusion in a cell attached to St. Julian's Church in Norwich. She claims to have known being loved by God and protected by his Providence. She wrote of the feminine divine, God being both mother and father – it was Jesus, she claimed, who answered her with the words she is known for: All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.

Offertory **All Will Be Well** Meg Barnhouse

I said, "Julian, you are holy, you are holding my hand
And Julian, you are holy, you are holding my hand."

She said, "All will be well, and all will be well,
All manner of things will be well."

I said, "Julian, do you not know, do you not know about hunger
And Julian, do you not know, do you not know about shame?"

She said, "All will be well . . ."

I said, "Julian, do you not know, do you not know about loneliness
And Julian, do you not know, do you not know about disease?"

I said, "Julian, do you not know, do you not know about cruelty?"

I said, "Julian, it's too much. It brought me to my knees."

She said, "All will be well . . ."

She said, "No one does not know, does not know about sorrow

And no one does not know, does not know about pain."

She said, "No one does not know, does not know about hunger

And no one does not know, does not know about shame."

She said, "All will be well . . ."

She said, "No one does not know, does not know about loneliness

And no one does not know, does not know about disease."

She said, "No one does not know about cruelty."

She said, "I know, it's too much. It brought me to my knees where I heard:

“All will be well . . .”

She said, “Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about tenderness
And Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about friends?”
She said, “Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about the Spirit?”
She said, “Babygirl, do you not know it’s only love that never ends,
And so . . .

“All will be well . . .”

Sermon

How Do We Bounce?

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Can we even imagine choosing to be an anchorite, someone who lives in a single room, alone for their entire life? Not to make too much of it, but when someone made the choice to enter their cell, they read the Prayer of the Dead, as they were now dead to regular life. Their decision could not be reversed at any time, and those who attempted to escape (according to Wikipedia) were returned by force and their souls damned to Hell. Julian’s church was destroyed during an air raid during WWII. It was gutted, but the walls remained, so it was rebuilt, and there is a modern shrine to her, if you’re inclined to go visit.

All will be well, she said. All manner of things will be well.

There is resilience in that claim, though it may make us wonder: What does it mean, after all, that all will be well? Who will it be well for? And, as we are generally interested in the timetable of such things, when? Will it be well in our lifetime?

The question of resilience is a really interesting one, actually. What is it that helps us return to a state of balance in our lives when we have been knocked out of whack. What helps us bounce back, if you will?

A story came to mind to me when I thought of bouncing – a very literal reference that our son experienced as a child. Ben had trouble sitting still, as many children do. And I’m not sure he appreciated the discipline of homework that his teachers thought he might. When he was even younger than the time of this story, we had him tested, as many parents of the era did. What is wrong with me, he asked? Nothing at all, I told him. We’re just trying to figure out how you work so that when you go into a place that expects you to work a certain way, we can figure out how to make it more your style.

I often wonder why we continue to box ourselves so firmly, let alone box in our children to a style of learning or being outside of which one is considered to have a problem when we know how badly it feels to imagine oneself the square peg that won’t fit in the proverbial round hole! How many of us have struggled with that, and still do, in our various ways? Why do we do that to each other and ourselves?

Back to my story. Our Ben was/is an affirmed individual, not inclined to worry about fitting the mold – and to be honest, I guess we rather encouraged his imagination. So, when the homework thing got to be a contest of wills, he discovered a solution, his own form of resilience. He would work for a little while, sometimes as long as, oh, 15 minutes(!) . . . and then he would put on all his winter gear and tell me he needed to bounce. He would run down the six or eight blocks to his friend Eric’s house, and the two of them would go out to the trampoline in their back yard and – literally – bounce . . . for a half-hour or so. And then he would come home, and finish his work, or as close as he could to finishing it.

It was his own form of returning balance to his body and mind. It was his fashion of resilience.

The first definition in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary for resilience is: “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.” I think the dictionary is referring to an object, like a pillow or those mattresses that come in a box and then expand to become queen-sized, but for Ben – and for many among us – it was literally recovering his body after the compressive stress of work that did not come easily to him, that did not fit his style of acquiring knowledge.

For most of us, resilience, bouncing back, is somewhat less literal, though I AM certain there is a direct relationship between our physical selves and our emotional and spiritual selves when it comes to resilience. There are all kinds of suggestions for us to bolster our resilient abilities: a good night’s sleep, good nutrition, regular exercise.

I am also certain that our individual capacity for resilience is impacted by the people around us – the people we share our lives with, who are woven into the fabric of our selves, how we support each other; how we respond to each other’s needs.

This morning’s On Being featured a poet whose name I can’t recall just now, but she mentioned that these times we are living in or through are especially fraught. And it made me think that the idea of resilience, then, is especially relevant but that somehow the ways that many of us have been responding feel not quite sufficient.

I mentioned last week that I have been reading more lately about Emergent Strategy, particularly as it is coming out of the black feminist environment: an evolving strategy that encourages us to see every crisis as an opportunity; that holds up the idea of biomimicry, for example – that is, the practice of mimicking the natural world in its resilience.

I'm so grateful for what these ideas have to offer us in response to a culture that has been so predominantly hierarchical and linear, a culture that has not engendered adaptation so much as observance to existing rules.

This alternate way of thinking and becoming feels significantly more generative, more creative, more adaptive and thus more inclined to resilience, even as the assumption is that the world we have known is in decline, which – when we think about it – it is, right? I actually would like to think that a world dominated by white, colonialist oppression and endless capitalist consumption and the delusion of infinite growth might be on its way out (!) though it's important to have an idea of what we are replacing it with.

I've been listening to a series of podcasts called How to Survive the End of the World: "learning from apocalypse with Grace, Rigor and Curiosity." Apocalypse, in the ancient Greek vocabulary, apparently meant "uncovering." It's interesting to think that instead of collapse something is being uncovered. This series of podcasts is hosted by the author Adrienne Maree Brown, who I referenced last week, and her sister, Autumn. The one I listened to most recently featured another black feminist thinker, activist, and educator, Alexis Pauline Gumbs.

One might ask what black feminists have to teach us about the end of the world, or the uncovering, which is to say, anything that might require resilience? We can imagine black women's lives that have been complicated, interrelated, with endless experience of considering how harm works. That feels like a good place to start.

There is a strong sense in the teaching and speaking of nonlinear time, of melding past, present, and future, of considering the wisdom of all those who have traveled and may travel still complicated journeys, filled with fear and yet moving beyond it.

Consider, for example, Harriet Tubman, who claimed "my people are free" even as she lived during the time of slavery, which suggests that freedom, lack of bondage to what would contain us or define us or compress us is actually not up to someone else. We get to choose our own definition.

So, what bind us, then? What fears or constraints or definitions prevent us from feeling the freedom of our own worth and value, that prevent us from stretching into our ability to be our best, most loving and generative selves? What holds us back from our own resilience?

Freedom is not a secret, Gumbs suggests, it's a practice. Like resilience, maybe – a practice.

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Many of us may have spent a fair amount of time recently watching the impeachment trial that is likely to wrap up this week. If you've seen it, you may feel as I have that it has been an emotional roller coaster, in the midst of a political environment and schedule that will only crank up over the course of the next nine months. However it is that we come into this particular sense of "compressive stress," we will need a capacity for resilience – as individuals and as a community – in order to weather it.

I want to borrow from our sisters of color the idea that in whatever way this feels like crisis we might consider it opportunity, and I would encourage us, on behalf of our capacity for resilience, to not get too attached to outcome but to exercise our imaginations on the many ways we will be traveling forward.

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Another resource I have been visiting lately is a little closer to home, at least theologically: a book by Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, called *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*. She reminds us of our own historical progressive Protestant inclination to align ourselves "with respectability instead of strangeness, with privilege instead of complexity, with socio-economic and racial uniformity instead of the intersections of overlapping identities."

It feels like she is reminding us that we have, in our history, chosen the box rather than freedom. It is, in its own way, more comfortable. There is something about habit being safe, even it is faked habit. I suspect our capacity for resilience as a tradition is influenced by that choice. I hope we are not making that same mistake individually.

On one of the podcasts I was listening to recently, they mentioned stumbling and calling it dancing. We're all doing that, aren't we? We shouldn't judge ourselves for it – but we can't let ourselves stop there, either. We have to keep trying to get the steps right.

The incomparable Maya Angelou said, "I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it."

Let's keep practicing, friends. Let's keep pushing our souls toward freedom even as it requires more imagination. It is no doubt the path to greater resilience.

And, always, always, let's do it together.