

RESILIENCE AS A SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

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[Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church](#), Bainbridge Island and No. Kitsap Co, WA (2/5/2012)

This short reading imagines what we might share together at our best. It's excerpted from a piece by Bainbridge Islander Gigi Leach, who organizes the [Matinees That Matter](#) series at the [Historic Lynwood Theatre](#), among other things. Hers was the winning entry in an essay contest sponsored last spring by [Frog Rock Forum](#), which promotes local "Connections for Community Resilience." The contest invited articulations on this topic:

What a Resilient Community Looks Like

by Gigi Leach

(Resilient community) is shaped by collective thought—a mutuality of purpose fired by originality of ideas that find appreciation, not judgment. The unity in community is not uniformity; its vibrancy is... strengthened by the skipping, hopping, leaping, dancing, walking, even stumbling in one direction of many feet of all sizes.

Resilience is a **quality of thought** that is

- *humble and flexible enough* to receive a push without being deflated or resentful
- *expectant and joyous enough* to receive new ideas with 'oh wow!' instead of 'oh no!'
- *resourceful and grateful enough* to appreciate the good at hand and not forever long for the greener grass that lies (elsewhere)...

While (resilience evokes) the recuperative quality of springing back into shape, living solely as a recovering community suggests stasis and not progress. A community has to have forward thrust too—the elasticity to reform, stretch, adjust, and delight in each new vision of purpose, *which springs it forward, not just back*.

The heart of a community beats strongly, resiliently when its constituents love and trust each other, even when they disagree. A resilient community looks...with love.

In any community and on any individual path there will be struggles, adversity, trials of one sort or another. Such is life. The strengths we muster to face any challenge come from deep within us. When pushed, our individual hearts *and* the heart of a community often draw from the resources that we have collected, the inspirations that guide us, during times easy and hard.

Resilience would seem to be a valuable quality—spiritual or otherwise—to bring to the fore, certainly when challenge knocks us for a loop, but also as a healthy, *proactive* part of one's life. I agree with Gigi Leach, that stasis or merely recovering from adversity is not progress. I'm convinced that using a lens of resilience can help us strengthen both our individual and

collective paths *forward*, especially if, as seems likely, the 21st century will continue to throw the weight of the world at us in ways that we don't expect—or at least don't *want* to expect.

One evocative word used in the introduction to an influential cross-cultural conference on [Community Resilience](#)¹ was “turbulence.” We should expect plenty more global and local turbulence. For example, we are now in one of the most active times of human migration in history,² which is one reason I'm offering a study group on “[Immigration as a Moral Issue](#)” [Feb., March & April, 2012].

In the months and years ahead, we will, no doubt, be called upon to rise to even more occasions of one struggle or another. Yet, sometimes we feel and act more resilient than we do at other times. Some people appear more resilient than others. Some communities shake off adversity to rise again and others succumb and disintegrate. What makes the difference? Can we improve the odds for resilience, alone and together?

I'm going to explore a little of both: the personal and the communal paths of resilience. I encourage you to dig deeper into this field yourselves, and also, I invite you to add resilience as a “quality of thought” into your spiritual practice. Imagine it as a lens through which you might see your own path unfolding in authentic ways. For me, I've found that as I breathe in resilience, I breathe out health.

One thing I've learned about the word “resilience” is that it initially referenced the field of metallurgy, describing how certain metals when heated will lose their shape, but when cooled can amazingly recover their original form, resiliently. So we've come to define resilience generally as being “able to withstand or recover from difficult conditions,” which accurately makes it a *reactive* skill.

I think, for instance of baseball superstar Jackie Robinson, who, in the 1940s and 50s showed immense resilience as the first African American to play in the major leagues, patiently enduring near-constant racial harassment from fans and fellow players alike.

Or imagine the degrees of resilience required and shown in places hit by natural disasters, such as Japan, Haiti and Sumatra, let alone New Orleans, just to name a few. And resilience certainly comes to mind around the recent and ongoing financial downturn, as many of us have struggled to recover from harsh losses individually, while the nation as a whole seeks a new economic equilibrium in a time of unsettling turbulence.

Locally, those of us on this Island are regularly seeing how resilient our community is—or not—in examples such as the compromising infrastructure rebuild of Winslow Way, or the legal complications of our longtime live-aboard neighborhood in the Harbor, or the strain on our electric substations by growing energy use.

Or the proposed conversion into a small park of that polluted gas station site there behind the long fence at the intersection near the ferry dock in Winslow. According to some analysts, any community's shared assets, *especially parks*, communicate what the local people think of themselves.³ I want to believe that the emerging transformation of that vacant, distressed lot—that has, for some years, been talking about us to everyone coming to and from the ferry—might soon communicate something a bit more positive.

Meanwhile, Sustainable Bainbridge has launched another new initiative called the [West Sound Time Bank](#). This online system for sharing time and talent will match local skills and needs *outside of the cash economy*, an ambitious but inspiring effort that can't help but increase community resilience. And this new West Sound Time Bank innovation is a great example of how being resilient is not *just* about bouncing-back or recovering from a particular external difficulty or circumstance. "A community has to have forward thrust, too," Gigi Leach reminds us.

Resilience can also be an ongoing quality of *internal* strength and hardiness, producing a supple capacity for prospering amid *whatever* "difficult conditions" might emerge. It is an overarching *practice*, building a resilient way of life, both individually and together.

[Yes! Magazine](#) used that phrase—"a resilient way of life"—as the theme for [an issue in 2010](#), from which I took their helpful survey ("[How Resilient Are You?](#)") reprinted on your Order of Service insert, backed by some counsel from the American Psychological Association about "[10 Ways to Build Resilience](#)."

The point is, resilience cannot be about merely recovering from one trial or another. Resilience is also a *proactive* skill and a way of life, both personally and in community.

The study of resilience, using that word, first emerged in the 1970s, in the field of epidemiology, looking at why some people got ill and others didn't.⁴ By uncovering the risks and the protective factors that helped define observed resilience, new tools emerged to steer people toward prevention of disease.⁵

Not long thereafter, another groundbreaking study investigated why some children from circumstances of adversity demonstrated a degree of resilience that enabled them to prosper much more than similarly challenged peers.⁶ Profiles of notably resilient children and their families showed three common, protective aspects that increase productive responses to negative life situations.⁷

These three factors won't be a surprise and can be visualized in a familiar series of rings around, first, the center core of a young person's positive self-image. Then, moving outward, a resilient child usually has close bonds with at least one emotionally stable parent. And in the outer ring is healthy connection with a nearby community of peers and supportive institutions.

This sounds simple enough, and is what one would hope for all children: strong self-image, close parental bonds and a supportive community. Unfortunately, there are also too many examples and studies of what happens when one or more of these factors are absent. In fact, the decline of resilience in children is contributing to even greater societal turbulence.

A couple of national programs that clearly promote childhood resilience are Head Start and Big Brothers Big Sisters, both of which, however, have had to constantly fight for funding in our myopic culture. It sometimes seems like we actively *want* our world to reduce resilience in young people.

This, despite clear evidence that “communities play a huge role in fostering resilience,”⁸ especially in providing “opportunities for children and youth to participate in the life of the community as valued members.” I am always, for instance, very heartened to see various of our Cedars youngsters handing out Orders of Service to many of you upon entering Webster Hall. That kind of simple opportunity to feel valued in community makes such a difference. (I can still recall my own sense of abiding empowerment, when, at age 12, I was put in charge of the Tool Table at the church rummage sale!)

And there's solid research that explains why. Says one expert: “Attending a church has been shown to increase a child's social network, provide a feeling of cohesion and belonging, (and) even promote a sense of personal control and sense of social justice when threatened.”⁹ Thus are internal and external resources marshaled in service of personal resilience—at church!

You might well imagine that some people spend much of their adult lives trying, in one way or another, to compensate for a lack of resilience, having missed out on any of those three formative and protective aspects (strong self-image, close parental bonds and a supportive community).

Listen to this list of six other behavioral elements that promote resilience in children, none of which, again, should surprise you, but now try to also envision them as decisive for adults, too:

- The ability to cope with stress effectively and in a healthy manner
- The willingness to seek help, as needed
- Being able to talk to loved ones about struggles
- Identifying as a survivor as opposed to a victim
- Helping others; and
- Finding positive meaning in hard circumstances.¹⁰

All of this psycho-social research tells me that a whole lot of power is contained in the term “resilience.” It is a lens through which we might better see and strengthen both our individual and collective paths forward. And with that, I’ll transition now into the larger arena of *Community Resilience*, which is the title of a very instructive [summary document from that cross-cultural study conference](#) I mentioned at the onset.¹¹

In recent decades, as resilience has risen as a topic of interest, many global studies have explored how very diverse populations have demonstrated either more or less of it. Three experiences are usually part of *low* resilience settings: the people there feel displaced, insecure and voiceless.¹² They do not feel like they have a place where they belong; they are anxious about their safety, their future or both; and they are certainly not feeling heard. *Displaced, insecure and voiceless, any of us would not feel very resilient.*

In contrast, people in settings of *high* resilience, besides not experiencing those three feelings, generally portray a significant overall common characteristic: they stay in touch with the core, defining essence of their community,¹³ and when challenges or adversity arise, they believe they can change things for the better.¹⁴ They resiliently manage to find a way back to expressing that defining essence—their purpose for and mission in being a community together.¹⁵

What I take from these comparisons is confirmation that, as described in our reading earlier, “(Resilient community) is shaped by collective thought—a mutuality of purpose...” Without that mutuality of purpose a group of people will feel disjointed, more likely to experience the painful effects of low resilience. Knowing that the best medical care attempts to *both* repair damage, as necessary, *and* suggest good preventative behavior that builds physical resilience and helps avoid more trips to the clinic, so, too, can we look at our life together in community.

We may be all too aware of the problems (dis-ease) that besiege us, and fixing what goes wrong or is unfair *is* important. But we can also build *systemic* resilience that *proactively* improves the odds for strong communities that will ride relatively smoothly over whatever bumps are ahead. “Mutuality of purpose” can be seen in any community’s common sense of identity, expressed by its shared value system and collective spiritual strength. What do you see around you that expresses your community’s shared values?

I think immediately, for instance, of the [Bainbridge Island/No. Kitsap Interfaith Council](#), in which I have participated actively for three and half years now, and currently serve as president. (From Cedars, Donna Larkin Mohr also did a year as president not too long ago, and Bill Scarvie is as dedicated a representative as there is.) The Interfaith Council may not be all that visible to you, but it nonetheless weaves a significant web of connection among us.

This institution that draws together representatives from umpteen faith groups every first Thursday of the month, has, for 15 years now, cultivated warm relationships across what are often very stiff boundaries. Last Thursday evening, as a couple dozen of us went around the table to name ourselves and our religious communities, it was truly inspirational to feel the diversity of spiritual paths convened there for common purpose. We are acting locally as we think globally, where peace would seem to hinge on religions getting along better than they often do.

The business we conduct can seem rather straightforward—such as planning annual activities, like the upcoming Interfaith Music Festival at which some of us from Cedars will sing and I will speak. But what’s also happening through the Interfaith Council is that our mutual relationships, developed over the months and years of dedicated attendance, are building resilience into the fabric of this community.

Should some local emergency or calamity arise that might benefit from action by the interfaith community, I expect we will not have to reach out to strangers to fashion a response, because we have invested in these good relationships over time. I’ll know who to call and trust, and that person will likely know me. Our resilience, our shared spiritual strength is palpable and very encouraging.

Of course, one can point out various quadrants of our local communities that appear more brittle, and not as encouraging, or reflect rather negative shared values, such as the unofficial motto of Bainbridge Islanders, as I’ve heard it, which is: “I know better.” So we’ve got some work to do in building collective resilience. Ever thus.

But this does not diminish the many ways our local communities are nonetheless putting forth very good efforts to support the common good. If, for instance, you tracked the growth of Sustainable Bainbridge since its founding in 2006, you'd see a large uptick in initiatives during the past couple years. Go on that [website](#) for a glimpse of what community resilience looks like.

And I've become particularly intrigued by how "resilience" might *differ* from "sustainability." Both are valuable, certainly. But I find a comparison helpful, if provocative. One resilience project title put it this way: "Thriving *Beyond* Sustainability."¹⁶

Sustainability is a goal, an ethical balance to be sought between inflow & outflow, so that we today do not unduly burden later denizens of Spaceship Earth with waste, pollution, diminishment, etc. A worthy goal, yes, but as such, it also suggests stasis, an ultimate perch of equanimity to then be maintained when the goal is achieved.

Community resilience, on the other hand, is not burdened with any specific goal, so it is inherently flexible, as it grows a group's *capacity* to absorb, change and accommodate whatever unfolds unexpectedly. With resilience, communities have less need for precise prediction, and can instead plan for an increasingly unplannable future. One image used for resilience is to ride the waves rather than be pulled under by them.¹⁷

Where sustainability is a noble destination, resilience is a dynamic posture, a never-ending process of increasing resources, whether of an individual person or a population of whatever size. In fact, resources for resilience can *always* grow—in number, in creativity, in depth and flexibility, in relational connections, in spiritual strength, etc.

I once knew of a middle-aged dentist, whose career path had been set early on in his life. He pursued the appropriate training and achieved a decent practice and comfortable lifestyle, with a nice house and family alongside him. To look at things, he had a very "sustainable" life, as it were. I knew his assistant, who would comment regularly about how messed up he was, psychologically.

Turns out he really didn't like being a dentist, but he had never questioned himself along the way, never tried anything else, never developed any flexibility, let alone any other skills or interests, even, and all his relationships were flat and frustrating. So his path became quite one-dimensional, trapped as he was, absent much spiritual strength at all. Goal-oriented, he had been, for sure. But resilient he was not.

As much as I strive for sustainability, I yearn for resilience, which shines as a somewhat brighter beacon for me these days. I find resilience to be a more reasonable, more personal, more inviting path, actively honoring our [Unitarian Universalist principle](#) of “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I see it as a spiritual strength to be cultivated.

Sustainability, not so much. It seems to be out *there* somewhere, more distant, impersonal. Important, yes; maybe even essential as a goal. But my concerted actions toward zero waste, for instance, can feel like a tiny drop in the bucket on the long march toward true sustainability. Whereas the same efforts are definitely, immediately increasing my sense of resilient living, which fortifies my spiritual strength as an interconnected being embedded in that web of life.

Actually, sustainability/resilience—it’s not an either/or decision, even though for my purposes here I’ve portrayed these two over and against each other a bit. Rather it’s what I like to call a “both/andian” path. *Both* resilience *and* sustainability imply an ethic for the good of the whole—the whole person and the whole planet. Hopefully we are building a new way that points increasingly in that direction, using the dynamic process of resilience to approach the noble destination of sustainability...

...which we are indeed approaching, despite malingering evidence to the contrary. I’ll end with another short, inspirational reading, this time from the eminent historical scholar Howard Zinn:

“When you have models of how people can come together, even for a brief period, it suggests that it could happen for a longer period. When you think of it, that’s the way things operate in the scientific world, so why not socially? As soon as the Wright brothers could keep a plane aloft for 27 seconds, everyone knew from that point on that a plane might be kept aloft for hours. It’s the same socially and culturally...

“We’ve had countless incidents in history where people have joined together in social movements and created a spirit of camaraderie or a spirit of sharing and togetherness which has absented them, even momentarily, from the world of greed and domination.

“If true community can stay aloft for 27 seconds, it is only a matter of time before such a community can last for hours. Only a matter of time before a beloved community, as Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of, can come into being.”¹⁸

Let the Beloved Community unfold, in sustained resilience. Near the beginning of the booklet on Community Resilience is a statement that could also be a simple summary of spiritual strength, the UU way: “The basis of this conversation is the timeless assumption that we are more together than alone.”¹⁹

The heart of a community beats resiliently when its constituents love and trust each other, even when they disagree. *Together*, we breathe in resilience, breathe out health. Let our paths collaborate and be resourceful, giving us spiritual strength to carry on, replenished and ready to re-engage in community. Go in peace, my friends, BE peace. Return in resilient love.

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- ¹ *Community Resilience: A Cross-Cultural Study*, Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Fetzer Institute, 2009 http://www.fetzer.org/resources/resource-detail/?resource_id=1000126
- ² *Ibid*, pg. 97
- ³ *Ibid*, pg. 72
- ⁴ Garmezy, N. (1973). Competence and adaptation in adult schizophrenic patients and children at risk. In Dean, S. R. (Ed.), *Schizophrenia: The first ten Dean Award Lectures* (pp. 163-204). NY: MSS Information Corp.
- ⁵ Garmezy, N.; Streitman, S. (1974). "Children at risk: The search for the antecedents of schizophrenia. Part 1. Conceptual models and research methods". *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 8 (8): 14–90. PMID 4619494.
- ⁶ Werner, E. E. (1982). *Vulnerable but invincible: a longitudinal study of resilient children and youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill New York: McGraw-Hill
- ⁷ Werner, E. E. (1995). "Resilience in development". *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 4 (3): 81–85. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.ep10772327.
- ⁸ Benard, B. (1991) *Fostering resiliency in kids: Protective factors in the family, school and community*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.
- ⁹ Crawford, E., Wright, M.O. & Masten, A. (2005). Resilience and spirituality in youth. In E.C. Roehlkepartain, P.E. King, L. Wagener & P.L. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 355-370). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ¹⁰ Matthew Tull, PhD (2007): "Posttraumatic Stress (PTSD): Overcoming Trauma" [2]
- ¹¹ *Community Resilience: A Cross-Cultural Study*, Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Fetzer Institute, 2009
- ¹² *Community Resilience*, pg. 19, 26
- ¹³ *Ibid*, pg. 25
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 44
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 46
- ¹⁶ *Thriving Beyond Sustainability: Pathways to a Resilient Society* by Andrés R. Edwards <http://www.newsociety.com/Books/T/Thriving-Beyond-Sustainability>
- ¹⁷ *Community Resilience*, pg 33
- ¹⁸ H. Zinn, 2006, "The Common Cradle of Concern"
- ¹⁹ *Community Resilience*, pg. 7

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