

**“NURTURING RESILIENCE”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

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**Reading:** “On the Counter Again” by Gunilla Norris

Taken out, exposed  
and cold on the counter,  
you are being kneaded

The air pounded  
out of you,  
you are turned

inside out. Rolled over  
in waves.  
Everything made visible

on the counter.  
I will not leave you now.  
I will not hurt you

or give advice.  
I will not rescue you.  
I will not stop this.

It is your true chance.  
Upside down you may  
take shape. You may become

more of yourself,  
resilient. Let this happen.  
Here on the counter

pounded, turned on end.  
You will become *less*  
And somehow more of *yourself*.

I hold your hand  
and do nothing.

Soon  
it may happen.

You will be kneaded  
into shape, smooth,  
able to go on again.

We are together here  
On the counter and alone.  
You will know me as *yourself*.

**Sermon:** “Nurturing Resilience”

Our theme this month is resilience, and most of this service is about how we can nurture it in our personal lives but I want to start with the bigger picture, here, at the Fellowship. On Thursday morning Roger’s father-in-law died, and so later that day he headed to Michigan to meet his wife Amy at her family home. As soon as we found out, the rest of the staff and any members we happened to be in touch with about various matters were immediately sympathetic. But there were still questions. How would we handle Roger’s commitments in his absence?

Experts say that one way to test whether something is fundamentally healthy, be it a body or family or organization, is by observing whether it can bounce back from a challenge or weather a crisis. It’s easy for everything to go well when, well, everything goes well, right? So what happens at the Fellowship when someone important suddenly needs to leave, even if only for a short while?

Normal life often demands that the best-laid plans be set aside. The lesson that I gleaned from the situation in the last few days is that we’re pretty resilient at the Fellowship. Staff and members pitched in to postpone that which wasn’t urgent, and to shift tasks around so that we could cover what needed to be covered and get on with doing what we do.

It’s a fitting weekend for this reflection, coinciding as it does with people hopefully returning their pledge cards so that the Executive Team and Governing Board can start budgeting for next congregational year. Knowing what our resources will be, and hopefully having enough to plan strategically, compensate fairly and dream big will help keep us resilient as a Fellowship, even as we prepare to weather the changes of new senior ministry.

Disruptions to the established order can be sad, like in the case of losing a loved one, but they’re also perfectly normal. There’s no shame in having to re-orient. But that doesn’t mean it’s always easy. When life demands that we produce a Plan B, how do we keep going? How do we re-establish, move forward? What does it mean to be people of resilience?

I have a few ideas, and then during our congregational response I’d love to hear some of what has worked in your lives. We’ll even leave a few extra minutes to be in conversation

with one another because I know there is a lot of wisdom in our community about this stuff. But before you all jump in, I'd like to propose seven ways that we might increase resilience in our personal lives and greater communities.<sup>i</sup>

This first suggestion is, to me, probably the most important. It's having an internal locus of control. This is a characteristic that psychologists agree is generally shared by resilient people. They locate control within themselves. One way to figure out if this is something that you might want to work on in your own life is to ask yourself these two questions: Do you perceive yourself as having control in some major ways over your own life? Or do you tend to be more comfortable blaming outside sources for failures and problems?

Resilient people tend to believe that the actions they take will affect the outcome of an event. Of course, some factors are simply outside of our personal control, such as a hereditary health condition, being struck by a natural disaster while you sleep or the impact of structural oppression. For example, I read a commentary via a major news outlet that claimed that Tony Robinson, the black teenager shot to death by a Madison police officer, should have prevented his own death. After all, said the article, what do you expect if you try to attack a cop with a gun? But even the Madison police chief is telling us that there is no indication this youth had a gun. It is crystal clear that this is part of a heated, life-and-death national conversation and it reminds me that resilience isn't only a matter of personal responsibility.

Yet, despite that important caveat, it is also true that most of us at most times have some power to make choices that will impact our reality, our ability to cope and our future.

If you struggle with balancing this, start small. In my own life thus far, I have been unable to magically summon a chauffeur who will take care of my winter weather transportation needs so I don't have to drive when it's icy... but instead of feeling bitter that I have to run my own errands, I've found that I can give myself a modest sense of control (and maybe even freedom!) by deciding which order to do my tasks in, so that my day feels tidy and orderly. That's one small way I try to maintain an internal locus of control.

Second, developing a strong social network helps with resilience. Having caring, supportive people around you acts as a protective factor during times of crisis.

Making friends isn't always easy (I'd say that it's not for most people) but it's worth the effort, and there are many ways to try to build community in small, manageable steps, whether it's taking cookies to the neighbors, signing up for a group exercise class or coming to the Fellowship. We hear all the time that people sought us out and keep coming back in order to feel less lonely and isolated and more held in community. Marie is always happy to meet with people who want to get more involved. Belonging to a social network will not banish trouble, but it can give you a place where you can be seen, share your feelings and get support and feedback.

My third idea about how to increase resilience is to work on embracing change. Flexibility is an essential part of resilience. There is a sign on the wall in the youth room (the one with

all the couches) that sums it up perfectly: be the willow, not the oak. Don't be the kind of tree that is rigid; bend and sway with the wind. Learning how to be more adaptable will help equip you to respond well when faced with a life crisis, or even just a change. Practice by trying something new before a crisis or challenge looms. Take a social risk that might help with my earlier point about the power of a social network. Develop a new skill or hobby.

For example, I often used to admire a friend of mine who fit an incredible amount of volunteer commitments into her otherwise busy life. She had a shift at the nonprofit feminist bookstore. She was a reading coach at the local public school. She took care of home upkeep for an elderly relative who lived alone nearby. Then, she got laid off from her job.

While she was certainly worried about her financial situation, I couldn't help but notice that she wasn't stressed about the idea of having to do something different. She was already good at that!

Some research even tells us that something as simple as taking a new route across town every once in a while might help keep us emotionally and cognitively limber. Resilient people often are able to use events they'd rather not have dealt with in the first place as opportunities to branch out in new directions. Our reading today, which Roger found and had hoped to be able to use himself, speaks perfectly of this; through the discomfort of kneading, dough is transformed into beautiful bread.

Fourth, nurture yourself. Life can be stressful; don't neglect your own needs. Years ago I learned from a therapist how to do what she called a body scan check-in.

It's a useful tool I still pull out sometimes when I feel overwhelmed and don't quite know what to do to take care of myself and get back on track. So I close my eyes and try to relax into a simple pose, standing, sitting or even lying down. The way it works is that I use my mind to ask myself how I'm doing. Usually if I give it a few seconds my spirit or heart (or something in me) will pipe right up. *Hey!* It will tell me, *my back is sore. Maybe I should get up from the computer more often.* Or: *Wow, I'm feeling tender from a hard day. A nice cup of tea would be a good treat right now.* Whatever trick or habit you find works for you, use it. Don't forget to build your self-nurturance skills and make time for activities that you enjoy.

Just as important as nurturing yourself, and now we're up to number five, is to challenge yourself! Research confirms common sense: people who are able come up with solutions to a problem are better able to cope with problems than those who cannot.

Think back to a challenge that you faced in the past. What were ways that you thought about handling it? How many potential strategies occurred to you? Which ones did you try—one, some, all? How'd you decide? How'd you know when the problem was solved or when to move on even if it wasn't?

Going forward, experiment with different ideas and solutions. By practicing problem-solving skills in the day-to-day, you can help ready yourself to cope with whatever more serious challenges might emerge. Since I knew I wanted to suggest to you all that this could be a helpful exercise, I did it too. I thought back to a time I was trying to figure out if I should stay living with a friend or move on to a different living situation. It was years ago but I still remember feeling uneasy and stuck, like I didn't know what to do or how to figure it out.

I think I've come a long way since then in being able to think critically about a situation, apply some logic and my intuition to it and generate options for my behavior. Being challenged doesn't necessarily mean you're doing anything wrong; it just means you have a chance to learn something and grow from it.

Now, I started out saying that my first recommendation, which is to develop an internal locus of control, was probably the most fundamental but I've changed my mind. Number six might be even more key to resilience. It's being able to ask for help. Cultivating your own resources is crucial but it has to include knowing when to ask for help and being willing to actually do it. You don't have to be in a full-blown crisis to ask for help!

Help for all ranges of issues can come from a lot of different sources, including self-help and other kinds of books, online communities, crisis call centers, shelters, support groups, talk therapy, art therapy, other kinds of professional counseling-type assistance. And please never forget that you can always ask for help from the Fellowship, from me or from any other staff member. We are here to help, even if you're not sure quite what you need. A big part of what I do during the week is meet with people who just need to reach out, and we have a wonderful, trained, confidential pastoral care team as well.

The last point I want to make is about mental illness. The seventh incredibly important way we can cultivate resilience is both intimately personal and widely applicable to society as a whole. We need to get real about the fact that mental illness exists, and that it's hard on those who have it and on those who are around people who live with it.

We also need to know that living with mental illness is possible. Every day, people learn how to survive, manage mental illness and even still be able to find joy and meaning in life.

There's still a lot of stigma around mental illness, which impacts a staggering proportion of our population. A full 10% of children and adolescents in this country alone suffer from serious emotional and mental disorders that cause significant functional impairment. The World Health Organization reports that 4 of the 10 leading causes of disability in the US and other developed countries are mental disorders. By 2020, major depressive illness will be the leading cause of disability in the world for women and children.

Mental illnesses are serious medical issues. Positive thinking and willpower can't fix them. They bear no relation whatsoever to a person's character or intelligence. If we don't understand this as a society, we aren't going to be able to do treatment well.

And there are consequences for under and mis-treating mental illness: unnecessary disability, unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, inappropriate incarceration, suicide and wasted lives. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, reports that the economic cost of untreated mental illness is more than \$100 billion each year in the US and I would even argue that the moral cost of letting people suffer is even higher than the price tag.

Here is a silver lining: If we could end stigma and offer appropriate effective medication combined with a wide range of services to people who live with serious mental illnesses, the impact of their illness would be meaningfully reduced. The best treatments for serious mental illnesses today are highly effective; between 70% and 90% of individuals have significant reduction of symptoms and improved quality of life with a combination of pharmacological and psychosocial treatments and supports.

It doesn't mean life will be perfect—that's not what recovery looks like in real life outside of Hollywood—but it could get a whole lot more livable for a whole lot more people. And it should.

The psychology expert Kendra Cherry says that scientific and medical research clearly shows that some people, for whatever reason, seem to come by resilience naturally. They just have it, whatever it may be. But the facts are equally clear that the kinds of behavior that help us be resilient can indeed be learned and constructed over time. If you are looking to increase resilience in your life, it might be worth trying one or more of the ideas I've mentioned here, many of them from Kendra Cherry's own work. We'll have our customary period of silence now and then open the conversation so that we might witness each other's stories and share with one another our own lessons of resilience.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.dailygood.org/story/618/how-to-bounce-back-from-failure-carolyn-gregoire/>  
<http://psychology.about.com/od/crisiscounseling/p/resilience-2.htm>  
<http://www.namiwisconsin.org/basics-of-mental-illness/>