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Arlington Street Church
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Resilience

Kem and I broke camp after our first night in the Sierras and walked out onto the new day's trail through the swampland home of a cloud of mosquitos so thick our bare arms were black and red with the slaughter. Even a black bear crossing our path could not really distract us from the madness of the bugs.

I tried not to remember the story told of some well-intended visitor to Albert Schweitzer's remote clinic in Lambarene, Africa who swatted a mosquito from the good doctor's arm. The mosquito died. Dr. Schweitzer, who coined the term *reverence for life*, said, "That was my mosquito." Back in civilization, I went searching on the web for something short of long pants, long sleeves, and a head net that would prevent another massacre in the animal kingdom.

I remembered that, the summer I was twelve years old, I lived in a primitive outpost in the New Hampshire woods with a dozen other Girl Scout campers and mosquitos to rival a jungle. We used something called Ole Time Woodsman Fly Dope – poured it into our hands and slathered it on our bodies and soaked our neckerchiefs in it – that kept us from being eaten alive. When we would hike down into the main camp to resupply, however, it also kept away human beings. We really stank. I loved the smell, as one might come to long, perversely, for the taste of the bitter medicine that finally made the pain subside, an acquired taste that evokes the feeling of sheer relief. In my web search, on a whim, I typed in "Ole Time Woodsman," and up it popped: "Human Scent Camo Since 1882." There was a special on three two-ounce bottles; I didn't hesitate to press "purchase."

I knew the package had arrived even before I could see it; through the layers of cardboard and bubble wrap and the sealed plastic bottles themselves, I could smell it. I'm not kidding you; I almost swooned. The smell was absolutely divine. I tore open the box. Kem said, "What stinks?!"

I breathed it in and remembered. I remembered cold, star-filled nights, and the northern lights, and drifting off to dream in the warm cocoon of my down sleeping bag. I remembered the long hike to the lake at dawn, its mirrored surface breaking under the prow of the canoe. I remembered passing a guitar around the campfire, and learning chords to hundreds of songs, and every last verse. I remembered intense friendships that have endured for nearly forty years. Immediately, I boxed up one of the bottles and sent it to my tentmate, Nancy.

Nancy and I love to laugh about our childhood exploits, and I know that she loves me – she'd do anything for me – but she is not sentimental. Nonetheless, two days later, an e-mail came in. “Got the Woodsman,” she wrote. “Took off the cap and left it open on the table. It smells just the same; even the dogs won't come into the kitchen. Ten thousand memories. Felt happy all day. Thank you.”

I keep a bottle on my desk. Kem will never let me wear it, mosquitos or not! But sometimes, when I want to remember, when I want to evoke those halcyon days, or evoke something from a very deep place, I open it and take a deep whiff. I brought it today; I'll have it with me, in line. Ask, if you dare! Alas, I sincerely doubt it will do for you what it does for me. But surely you, too, have something that makes you remember, that strengthens you by reminding you of a time you were happy, peaceful, and free. *What is that for you?* If it's a photo, a stone or a shell, a piece of music or a book, whatever it is, I encourage you to have it at hand: something to inspire and uplift, a touchstone to give you hope and courage for the journey, something to nourish your resilience.

I said it last week, and I want to elaborate today: I am endlessly astonished and uplifted by the resilience of the human spirit.

“At first, as [Pooh and Piglet] stumped along the path which edged the Hundred Acre Wood, they didn't say much to each other; but when they came to the stream and had helped each other across the stepping stones, and were able to walk side by side again over the heather, they began to talk in a friendly way about this and that, and Piglet said, 'If you see what I mean, Pooh,' and Pooh said, 'It's just what I think myself, Piglet,' and Piglet said, 'But on the other hand, Pooh, we must remember,' and Pooh said, 'Quite true, Piglet, although I had forgotten it for the moment.’”¹ Remembering is important to resilience: remembering, not the difficult days, but having survived the

1 A. A. Milne, from “In Which Piglet Meets a Heffalump” in *Winnie the Pooh*, 1926

difficult days; not the desperation, but the redemption.

The first time I experienced this at a visceral level was during a Women Waging Peace colloquium, as the Rwandan women – Hutus and Tutsis – spoke of surviving the 1994 genocide. When their stories became unbearable – when the air in the room was saturated with horror and sheer, soul-searing grief – they would suddenly, unbidden, get to their feet and call out a dance. The entire room rose with them and began to sway together, and then to move. I can remember feeling so sick I wondered if I could stand, let alone dance, but it was that very physical response to hearing stories of trauma that the dance was meant to heal. These were not new dances; they were very old dances that they had danced before the war, before there were Hutus and Tutsis, when there was just one people, living together in peace, as they longed to live again, now. And they sang as we danced, a high, sweet accompaniment, and we danced 'til we laughed, and could bear to sit and listen again. My friend, Justine, gave me a beautiful swath of fabric, meant to tie around my waist to fashion into a kind of long skirt when I need to dance. Just seeing it, touching it, stroking it, invokes the presence of these heroic women in my life, and their bravery and determination to live beyond surviving. Theirs is a dance of resilience.

“Resilience is the ability to adapt well to stress, adversity, trauma, or tragedy. It means that, overall, [we] remain stable and maintain healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning in the face of disruption or chaos.”

The Mayo Clinic has developed a Resilience Chart to determine your resilience quotient; you can fill it out online, if you'd like.² Looking for a strong *yes*, it asks questions, about how easily you adapt to change, how in-control you feel, how quickly you bounce back from adversity, how dependable and close your relationships are, how optimistic you are, how clearly you think under pressure, whether you're able to maintain a sense of humor, how self-confident you are, how you handle uncertainty, whether you know where to turn for help, and how much you enjoy challenges and taking the lead. The one question that points to a spiritual life asks whether or not you believe things happen for a reason.³

That's another sermon. But I suspect that whether or not we believe things happen for a reason, if we are determined to make something out of the wreckage, and rise from

2 See www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078

3 Based on the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), Connor K.M., Davidson J.R. ©2003.

the ashes after we've gone down in flames, that's resilience. Also, knowing where to turn for help isn't enough; true resilience comes with growing strong enough to *ask* for help. And I'm talking here about spiritual resilience; the capacity not merely to go forward, but to go forward with spirit: to laugh, even as we bear our grief; to forgive, even in the wake of betrayal; to love, even if our hearts have been broken.

The Mayo clinic suggests we exercise our resilience muscles by connecting in community, remembering to laugh, learning from experience, cultivating optimism, taking care of ourselves, being flexible and accepting change, learning new things, taking action and working towards goals, keeping perspective, and letting go. If you struggle with these skills, you are not alone., Take heart! They can be learned. We can learn them from one another.⁴

Here's a great piece on spiritual resilience, written by Andrew Agacki, a Unitarian Universalist and Zen Buddhist practitioner from Milwaukee:

“Early in the morning, the day before last Thanksgiving,” he writes, “I involuntarily started to 'fall', very slowly; a strange pulling on my right side, as if I had 'wanted' to. Forcing myself up, I wondered if I ... [were] just tired. No bother, I was soon fine. Then, in the afternoon, as I was getting into [the] car with my youngest son, the right side of my tongue 'tingled,' as if I had just left the dentist. I couldn't reach the buckle for my seatbelt, and I couldn't remember how it worked. When I spoke to my son, it took a bit of concentration to find the words, and more, to say them. Curious, I thought. In about fifteen minutes, this, too, went away. In the evening, my family and I went out for dinner. It happened again. I concentrated very hard on forming the words that I would say to my wife; calm, but telling her, nonetheless, that I thought I ... [was having] a stroke.

“I was in the hospital for three days,” he continues, “and ... found, in the end, contrary to the seriousness of the TIAs (Transient Ischemic Attacks), nothing out of the ordinary: no damage on the brain scan; ... echocardiogram and ultrasound of my carotids ... perfectly clear; ... cholesterol 'not quite up to border-line' ... and *no* after-effects. Currently, my only prescribed treatment: one aspirin per day....

“[Two weeks later,] I still have no sense of urgency, or worry, about it. Nothing to point to, nothing to grasp. If ... I had had something show up on the tests in the hospital,

4 See www.mayoclinic.com/health/resilience/MH00078

then there would be a 'thing' I could point to and say, 'That's it! There's my answer!' But it never seems to be like that, with me; it would be too easy (though 'easy' I wouldn't mind *once* in a while!). No; I don't suppose I want easy answers, when all is said and done. I would rather be mildly uncomfortable with the thought that I don't have the 'answer' than trust in someone else's words, someone *else's* answer. Something to grasp, something to hold on to: nice for the moment, but transient.”

Andrew Agacki concludes, “Tomorrow's another day, if it comes....”⁵

This, too, is resilience, marked by equanimity: love of life balanced with an acceptance of life's limits, including the final limit. Poet Mary Oliver writes,
*Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*⁶

At the Arlington Street Zen Center, we close the final seated meditation of the evening with what are called the *metta* phrases. *Metta* is the Pali word for loving kindness; these phrases are an affirmation of care for ourselves, for one another, and for the whole world. They have been variously translated and iterated; most commonly, one hears, “May all beings be peaceful, may all beings be happy, may all beings be free.” If you come to the meditation retreat this afternoon, and I hope you will, you'll learn the direct translation from the Pali, the very words the Buddha spoke, passed down over the past two thousand five hundred years.

Years ago, a Tibetan nun was interviewed after a long imprisonment by the Chinese government. A reporter asked her how, in particular, she had survived the years in solitary confinement. She replied, “I knew that, at every moment, somewhere in the world, someone was saying *metta* for me.”

Shaken awake, I began to practice saying *metta* in earnest. It has become a habit that has comforted me, steadied me, and helped me to stay just this side of hopeful when I felt all but utterly empty-handed. It has become a habit, in other words, that supports my resilience, as I hope it supports the resilience of those whom I hold in its universal embrace. May I, may you, may he, may she be happy, peaceful and free. May we, may you, may they, may all beings be happy, peaceful, and free.

⁵ Currently a member of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee, Andrew Agacki has been practicing Buddhism for 10 years, and took Precepts in the Kwan Um School of Zen in 1998. This is from his piece entitled “Nothing to Point To, Nothing to Grasp,” which appeared in *UU Sangha*, Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, Winter 2000, Vol: IV Number: 2

⁶ from “The Summer Day,” in *New and Selected Poems* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992)

My spiritual companions, let us avail ourselves of the tools of resilience. May memory serve you as a reference point for joy. Let everything – *everything!* – be grist for the mill. May we walk one another through the worst of it, and the best of it, and may we dance.

Here's a beautiful poem to go on; Rainer Maria Rilke's *All Will Come Again*:

All will come again into its strength:
 the fields undivided, the waters undammed,
 the trees towering, and the walls built low.
 And in the valleys, people as strong and varied as the land.

And no churches where God
 is imprisoned and lamented
 like a trapped and wounded animal.
 The houses welcoming all who knock
 and a sense of boundless offering
 in all relations, and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond,
 no belittling of death,
 but only longing for what belongs to us
 and serving earth, lest we remain unused.⁷

May you, may we, may all beings be happy, peaceful, and free.

⁷ Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, translators, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*