

“Personal Resilience”
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To pull oneself up by their bootstraps. This is a very common turn of phrase in the world today. Often referring to the ideas of succeeding only by one's own efforts or abilities. Or to recover from a setback without any outside help. It is used to suggest that people who are down and out shouldn't need the support of those around them to cope or survive. For example, people who are poor, and the greater population should not have to pay taxes to support them. Or when someone has been successful in their careers, and moved to the top of a corporate ladder, they have bootstrapped themselves. It is also a common term for the more current “gig” economy – or the concept that individuals are independent, contract, online workers – due to the fact that one income is not sufficient enough to support themselves. But where did this term come from, and is our understanding of it accurate.

To pick oneself up by their bootstraps is actually very old. It is attributed to a set of fictional stories written in 1780. The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen, in which the main character attempts to claim that he pulled himself out of a swamp by grabbing his bootstraps and yanking. At the time of the stories it was presumed that Baron Munchausen was claiming a ludicrously far-fetched or even impossible task. Interestingly this name Munchausen is also where the term Munchausen Syndrome comes from – more appropriately named Factitious Disorder, in which a patient feigns illness, either due to emotional or mental illness.

So how did we get from the idea that pulling oneself up by the bootstraps was a ludicrous idea, and even suggesting the possibility of the individual lying about their situation, to a concept of enterprise, recovery and individual success? Somewhere along the way we shifted from a sense of collaboration and connection, evident by the ridiculousness of going it alone and pulling oneself out of a swamp by bootstraps -> to a community of individualism, self-sufficiency and dare I say isolation.

I was ordained to Unitarian Universalist 2 and ½ years ago, and at the beginning of the service we had a land acknowledgement from two indigenous women that I worked with in 2013-2016. Kate offered a welcome to the land where we were. Kate told those gathered in Calgary about the people who lived there, before the settlers came, talking about the Pikani, Kiani, Siksika and Dene peoples. One thing that she said that was so profound to me was this “You need lots and lots of people to help survive in this traditional territory, there is not a lot of wood, and you have to travel far to get resources.” This was something that I knew, and yet it was a new way of knowing for me. A recognition that indigenous peoples in other territories might live in small family groupings, but in the Prairies large groups of people stayed together to help one another survive. The ability to hunt buffalo, and to collect enough wood to keep people warm during cold prairie winters required a lot of people.

Similar to this, I remember a story that my grandfather told me about growing up in southern Manitoba in the 40s and 50s. He was a farm boy, my great-grandfather farmed

grain and my great grandmother kept a vegetable garden, (or I suppose now a days what would be considered a small farm, seeing as how they had enough garden plots to feed their family of 8 kids and 2 parents all the vegetables they would eat throughout the winter.) And they also kept some animals, chickens mostly for their eggs, and cows, both for milk and meat. My grandpa told me that they belonged to a cattle share with neighbouring farms. Meaning that each month one of the farms would donate a cow to be killed and butchered so that all 6 families would be able to eat for 2 months, and then the next family would offer the same. In this way each family would only have to share one animal, but would be fed all year round.

There was recognition, not only in my grandfather's time, and in a time before Europeans made it to Turtle Island, what is now called North America, that supporting one another was the only way we were able to survive, let alone just be resilient, but to actually survive the cruelties of this land, and the necessities of being human. Somewhere along the way we were separated from this idea of communities offering more substantial support to its members.

One of the easiest ways for me to describe my idea of the Divine, my idea of the sacred, or even God is by talking about an exercise I had to do in seminary. I was taking a class called Unleashing your multi-cultural ministry. The first day we were asked to help decorate the altar that would be at the front of the room for the rest of our time together. My professor, who is a religious educator at heart, and who loves to incorporate different ways of learning into his curriculum, gave us the task of taking home several pipe cleaners, and to create an image that for us would reflect God/Spirit of Life/The More/Ultimate Reality... choose whatever name suits you the best. Now, I am not a theist; I don't think I ever have been. I grew up a Unitarian, in a Fellowship church, listening to the story of Jesus and God like it was a fairy tale. For me stories from the bible held the same symbolism of love and morals that Winnie the Pooh stories held. And, it wasn't until I was a preteen that I actually discovered that Jesus was a man who had really existed, and really lived through some of those struggles. Before this he was just a character in my Sunday school classes.

But having spent 3 years in seminary, working through my theological reflections, allowed me to claim my belief in God. Not a Christian sense of God, but using the word God to mean more than just a deity, to mean more than a Proper Noun.

Now I know that Wikipedia is not considered the most reliable source for information, however it states "The concept of God, as described by theologians, commonly includes the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, divine simplicity, and as having an eternal and necessary existence." In that same wiki article God has also been described as incorporeal, the source of all moral obligation, and the greatest conceivable being in existence. And while the Christian God can be described using these words, the Christian God is not the only thing that fits this definition.

I believe that GOD is relationship. The being that I recognize as all-knowing, ever-present, and all powerful. The concept that holds my moral obligation and the thing that is the greatest conceivable being in existence is our relationships.

Whether it is my individual relationship with each of you, or the special relationship that this group of us here on these screens create together, or the relationship that I have with myself, or with the earth, doesn't matter. It is the relationship that is important.

How we are in that relationship

how we engage the other or how we don't,

how we hold the other's emotion and logic,

how we choose to change our behaviour because of the relationship,

or how we choose to ignore the relationship by not changing.

This is my God. And though it may not be a personal being, it is divinely simple and its existence is necessary. It holds our moral obligation and I believe that it is the greatest conceivable existent.

And much like the Christian God I believe that relationships can be misunderstood, misrepresented, and even abused. So in order to create an image with pipe cleaners for my assignment I created two people holding hands, to show the space between them, the relationship that I see as god.

The connections that hold one to another, knitting us together in the fabric of this world, this for me is The Divine, that needs to be witnessed, and worshiped.

And this idea is expressed, and perhaps more wholesomely described by philosopher and Theologian Dr. Henry Nelson Wieman. "In his book *Man's Ultimate Commitment* Henry Nelson Wieman suggests that we have a need in our lives to achieve the infinite potentialities present in us at birth. He stresses the importance of our commitment to a life-long process that enables us to live our lives to the fullest. In order to obtain the Greatest Human Good one has to commit to live Creative Interchange from within. This special human interchange, that Henry Nelson Wieman coined Creative Interchange, is our ability to learn what others have learned, to appreciate what others appreciate, to feel what others feel, imagine what others imagine and to creatively integrate all this within what we have already acquitted and form this way our true individuality." Described a different way, creative interchange is experience, the kind of experience that transforms us in ways in which we cannot transform ourselves. As we meet in shared experience, we become more fully human in ways in which we can never predict, or bring about by striving to do so.

If we attempt to extrapolate this idea of creative interchange, a practice of becoming more fully human in ways that we could not have done so by ourselves alone, and combined it with this notion of cooperation, collaboration and connection to the people surrounding us, then it would seem that we need one another more than ever for our resiliency. Our need to rely on one another is not only tied up with our survival on the harsh prairie lands, hundreds of years ago, before modern technologies and infrastructure was developed. Nor is it tied up in the farming life of the first half of the 20th century. But it is also wrapped up in our spiritual resilience. An integration of our experiences with others is the only way in

which we are going to become more fully human. For me, a faith community, a Unitarian Universalist church encompasses many of the needs for human life. It gives us the space to question, struggle and perhaps come to an understanding of theological question, or perhaps we could call them “the big questions in life.” A faith community should allow us a space to care for and to be cared for, not only in our moments of sorrow, pain, struggle and strife, but also in the moments of joy, celebration, achievements and peace. Being part of a community that cares means that you are witnessed as you go through the rollercoaster of life. It also means that there is a community of people who we can discern about our commitments with. Discovering what ethical, spiritual, financial and relational commitments are appropriate for us. And we are able to discover what issues in the world are worthy of our energy. Working for justice, perhaps fighting for justice, realizing injustice and learning about others opinions of justice - is all made easier when a community struggled with the Big Questions, have cared for one another and discovered what their commitments are.

When I dream of a belonging to a community, this is what I think of. A place where I can seek and share my views, to struggle and discern with what I believe is right, good, wrong, real, necessary or possible. There are people who will care for me, and I for them, we will celebrate one another and offer solace when it is needed. I will look to those in my community to help me discover what to commit to. To figure out where my resources of energy, time, finances, and talents should be put. And I will discover who and what I care about in the greater community, and in our world. I do not look to be guided through my community life, but I want to be encouraged to ask, ponder and choose my path, and I would hope that a community, a faith community would help me be responsible to those decisions.

Perhaps we cannot know personal resilience until we belong to a community that helps us to find our strengths, determine what to do with our resources, discover what we believe, and to figure out our path. Maybe it is, as Jill Suttie suggests, that we cannot know personal resilience until we have a social support around us, be that the personal relationships that we have with one another, or the social safety nets that support us, like health care, and parental leave. In addition to these thoughts of social supports, these relationships that allow us to find personal resiliency, these people are going to be much like Frog, helping us to ignore the negative voices of the robins, telling us to quit.

Not only are the robins telling us to quit. But we have actually commodified our community resilience. We no longer need to find wood to keep ourselves warm, we pay someone else to find, create, and harness the energy that is needed. We no longer need to rely on neighbours to share in their bounty, we instead pay for groceries, from box stores. Or perhaps we are able to purchase directly from farmers for parts of the year. But we have allowed our survival, our resilience to be replaced with money. Let us not forget our community when it comes to other lawyers of our personhood. Let us not forget about the social supports, when we are grappling with life’s big questions.

I think it is foolish to believe that we can get through life all by ourselves. It seems as ridiculous as being able to pull myself out of a swamp by yanking on my boot straps. And yet, often when we reach out to those who we are in connection to, we feel a sense of shame, a neediness, an inner struggle with our own worthiness. I invite you to recognize,

much like frog did in our story, that running, jumping, waving and shouting, will allow us to fly. Relying on those around, on the social supports that we create, and nurture, on the beloved community that we have chosen to be part of, is what will help us fly higher than the sky.

May it be so, and may we make it so.