

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN RESILIENCE
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In the past couple of years I have been asked with increasing frequency: "How do you account for your resilience?" The question initially surprised me, as I had not thought about myself in terms of resilience. I realize that the concept of human resilience has recently gained in popularity in psychology, and I welcome this development as a needed corrective to psychology's longstanding emphasis on pathology, vulnerability, fragility, and trauma. Could this concept of resilience also throw a new and useful light on my own life?

Many years ago I noticed that another new concept, that of "holocaust survivor", appeared more and more frequently in print and conversation. It took me a while to recognize that I fit the category. There actually came a moment when I said to myself "I guess I am a holocaust survivor". After all, as very young children in WWII Poland my sister and I were marked for death and spent six years hiding, being captured, escaping, being captured again, put in concentration camps, forced into death marches and cattle car transports until we finally arrived in Sweden as stateless refugees in 1945. We had, indeed, survived the holocaust.

So I do understand why people, who know something of my history, ask me about my "resilience". I had to acknowledge that I must have been fairly resilient, though I was no more prepared than anyone else to account for it. Eventually I became interested in reflecting on my experiences to gain some understanding of my resilience and possibly of resilience in general.

Current psychological theory (including the popularity of PTSD) would expect me to emerge from such prolonged and horrific experiences damaged or broken in body, mind, and spirit. I don't seem to be, but perhaps I really am and am "faking it"? Or, if I am not seriously damaged, then I must be endowed with a large portion of "resilience". Or, perhaps, my ability to survive and live a good life are not that unique or surprising, just not consistent with our theories.

Human beings are intrinsically tough and resilient. The unique evolutionary path we have taken as a species relies predominantly on learning, openness, flexibility, and adaptability. We survive and even thrive in every conceivable environment on this planet and are now moving on beyond mother earth. We have created a bewildering variety of social and cultural realities, where we endlessly experiment and recreate ourselves. Certainly, one of the sterling characteristics we demonstrate in this amazing process is resilience

On the individual level, my reflections on what may have contributed to my own resilience led me to a few ideas that may or may not be applicable to others or to a generalized understanding of resilience. But if we collected and integrated many such individual reflections, perhaps we might gain a broader, more general understanding.

Age, or mental emotional flexibility. It may be counter intuitive to think that living

through the holocaust as a child rather than as an adult could be an advantage, but I believe it was for me. In a concentration camp children as well as adults are equally helpless, dependent, uncomprehending, with no control over their lives. Such conditions are more "normal", or age appropriate, for a young child. While physical survival was a daily challenge, emotional survival may actually have been less difficult for children than for adults. A child has not developed a sense of firm personal identity, a system of moral, social, and ethical values, belief, and loyalties. While a young child may feel lost and terrified, there is less of a developed psychic structure to crumble, less over which to feel unbearably humiliated, hopeless, dehumanized, and demoralized. A child, whose parents have been killed can more easily, I believe, gravitate to another adult for love and protection, than it would be for a mother or father, whose child has been killed before their eyes, to deal with their "failure" to protect a son or daughter.

Not taking it personally. For whatever reason, as I look back, I did not take the hostility and mistreatment personally. I do not mean that I was not afraid, or that I did not believe I could be harmed or killed, only that I saw these actions as misguided and mistaken acts by individuals who did not know me. I do not remember the face of a single camp guard or Nazi soldier. On the other hand I did take personally the occasional act of kindness and protection by a stranger, and I remember these faces very clearly.

Magical/spiritual thinking. I developed a private system of beliefs that I was personally protected by a divine power (especially the Virgin Mary). This was a version of the "just universe" doctrine, namely, that if I behaved and thought properly, and were a good person, I would be watched over and kept safe. This was a kind of contract, and it gave me an inner sense of control over what happened to me. Was this faith or delusion? Does it matter? It protected me from unmanageable anxiety.

Boundaries between what was and what is. At almost the exact day the war ended my sister and I were removed from the holocaust scenario and found ourselves in Sweden, a quintessentially safe, decent, civilized, peaceful country. It was a decisive break with the past. I almost immediately learned the new language, went to school for the first time, began to live a normal life, and thought as little as possible about what I had lived through. Seven years later I repeated this process when we came to live in the US. The quick learning of foreign languages was an especially effective means of distancing from the past. Embracing these fortuitous geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries may have functioned analogously to dissociation. But it would not be accurate to describe it as dissociation. I have always had very clear memories of my war experiences, and I was conscious of deciding to move on, to not dwell on the past, to create a new life.

Could any of these ideas be helpful in our general understanding of resilience, or apply to our work with our clients? We are all resilient in our own ways. I have been struck by how creative, determined and resilient clients are, even in the service of holding on to maladaptive patterns of behavior. Perhaps we could look for ways to redirect this resilience to the development of more current and more useful life patterns.