

Spirituality in the Face of Trauma

Rise & Shine, January 5th

Romans 5:3-5

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Questions:

1. Have you experienced personal trauma that has changed you forever?
2. What are some differences between learning from and obsessing over trauma?
3. Does fortitude imply active work against the down pull of trauma or passive acceptance of it?
4. How have you seen God work in and through your weaknesses?

In the News

Spiritual Fortitude Is the 'More Robust Counterpart' to Resilience, Says Trauma Specialist

Some people have things happen in their lives from which they never recover. Soldiers, victims of abuse, victims of crime, survivors of terrorist or other mass attacks, refugees, survivors of catastrophic natural disasters, and individuals who have suffered physical, emotional, spiritual, and/or psychological harm from other disturbing incidents often never fully recover. Researchers are learning that it may not be possible for these people to return to his or her pre-trauma state.

Shelly Rambo, a professor of theology at Boston University School of Theology who has researched extensively how trauma affects individuals, explains that "Experiences of pain, loss and suffering are part of human experience, and in time many are able to integrate the suffering into their lives." (Rambo is using "integrate" in a technical, psychological sense, where it refers to building a stable, meaningful life in the present so that one does not dwell in the grip of the past.)

But traumatic response, said Rambo "refers to an experience in which the process of integration becomes stuck." She points to pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring's identification of trauma as "a bio-psycho-spiritual response to overwhelming life events."

"In traumatic response," Rambo said, "there is a breakdown of multiple systems that we rely on to protect us from harm and to process harm. *In these cases, our systems are not simply slow to integrate the impact; they fail to integrate it.* Trauma marks a 'new normal' in that there is no possibility of the person returning to who they were before. A radical break has occurred between the old self and the new one."

People who study trauma tell us that three things are common among people who have been severely traumatized. They are:

- *The past is not in the past.* Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder don't simply recall the violence they experienced in war, but relive it in the present.
- *The body remembers.* We are learning that traumatized persons hold an implicit memory of traumatic events in their brains and bodies, a memory often expressed in symptomatology, such as nightmares, flashbacks, startle responses and dissociative behaviors.
- *Wounds remain.* While there is a lot we do not know and may never know about the wounds people carry and the many ways in which life marks them, we have learned that many wounds simply do not go away.

Therapists and clinicians who work with those who have been traumatized generally do not speak about recovery, they speak about *resilience*, "to acknowledge the challenge of living with the effects of trauma rather than just moving beyond it."

Jamie Aten, a disaster psychologist and disaster ministry specialist, who is also a survivor of Hurricane Katrina and of stage IV cancer, and who had spent his career studying resilience, now says that his near-death cancer experience changed his whole outlook on that topic.

Writing this month on the *Religion News Service* (RNS) website, Aten said, "Commonly defined as our ability to bounce back from adversity, resilience has of late been touted as the key to a successful life. But definitions like this

one didn't resonate with my personal experience of suffering from cancer. I had failed to experience the 'bouncy' quality of resilience."

Aten, who is executive director of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute (HDI) at Wheaton College, often works with disaster survivors. In so doing he observed "that other people's experiences with recovering their lives were also sometimes at odds with popular notions of resilience."

While Aten still believes resilience is important for facing hardship, he said that as a Christian, he started to wonder if there might be "a biblical equivalent to the psychological concept of resilience, or perhaps a more robust counterpart... another way to understand and describe what it meant to weather life's hardships, especially from a faith perspective." He eventually settled on the spiritual concept of fortitude.

A research team from Aten's HDI published an article in the American Psychological Association journal *Psychological Trauma* comprising several studies on spiritual fortitude that sought to identify what was happening in some survivors. "For scientific purposes, we described spiritual fortitude as 'enabling people to endure and make redemptive meaning from adversity through their sacred connections with God, others and themselves,'" Aten said.

"At the core of fortitude is the ability to cope with long-suffering. While one of the hallmarks of resilience is expedited recovery from adversity, fortitude places greater value on endurance," Aten said.

Further, Aten said, "Our studies showed spiritual fortitude's effects to be distinct from resilience and grit (i.e., the perseverance for long-term goals). Whereas resilience might be thought of as what helps us push through suffering to get back to life, we found that fortitude helps us find life amid the suffering: That is, spiritual fortitude enables us to reconceptualize flourishing where a positive outcome is not guaranteed (i.e., terminal illness) or may be difficult for a prolonged period (i.e., disaster-impacted populations)."

In the HDI team's article for *Psychological Trauma*, they wrote "spiritual fortitude predicted well-being, meaning, lower anxiety, and greater religious coping, above and beyond the predictive power of grit and resilience."

Acknowledging that fortitude is not a new concept, Aten noted that fortitude is commended in the Bible and that the 13th-century Dominican friar and philosopher Thomas Aquinas defined fortitude as an act of "brave endurance."

Summing up, Aten said, "Taken as a whole, our series of studies revealed that fortitude helps people persist in the face of challenges, leading to positive mental health outcomes and flourishing. This offers hope to anyone living through adversity; it allows us to relieve ourselves of the pressure to "bounce back" to the way we were before. Often life's biggest challenges change us, and that is okay -- we now know that there's great value in simply enduring."

James 1:2-4; 5:11

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing. ... Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

2 Corinthians 12:7-9

... a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. ..."

Prayer for Protection (BCP p.832)

Assist us mercifully, O Lord, in these our supplications and prayers, and dispose the way of *your* servants towards the attainment of everlasting salvation; that, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, they may ever be defended by *your* gracious and ready help; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.