Resilience
Lessons from the Global Geneva Trenches

Notes and Quotes

Blokes Gathering—Nyon, Switzerland—15 January 2026
Kelly O'Donnell PsyD
mcaresources@gmail.com – www.membercare.org

Hungarian girl in Austria 1961
200,000 Hungarians fled the country in the 1956 uprising
(UNHCR image)

"We live now upon an island amid many perils,
and our hands are more often upon the bowstring than upon the harp."
Haldir in *Return of the King* (Lothlorien chapter) Tolkien

Resilience is facing reality:
navigating and growing through the challenges, changes, and adversities in life;
bouncing back better and being refined through life's hardship and suffering, etc.

For everyone will be salted with fire.
Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again?
Have salt in [among—NIV] yourselves and be at peace with one another.
Mark 9:49-50 *NASB*

Resilience Grid: C2-S2
--Character strengths
--Coping skills
--Social connections
--Spiritual core
--Supportive Care by organizations (not discussed at the gathering)

*"**Cultivate your resilience** in five areas: character strengths such as perseverance and integrity; coping skills for stress management, self-care, work-life balance, and interpersonal relationships; mutual support with colleagues, friends and family; staff support and wellbeing resources in one's organization; and a transcendent sense of purpose, meaning, and hope."* Unbreakable? Recognizing Humanitarian Stress and Trauma, Kelly in *Global Geneva* (October 2017). Expanded version HERE.

Illustration courtesy Marc Rosenthal (http://www.marc-rosenthal.com) included in this article.

"I used to think that I was kind of hardened to suffering and misery…You learn to deal with it and hold it at bay while you are working. Its when you're alone that it creeps up on you." Paul E. Arès, Watching for the Signals, in *Sharing the Front Line and the Back Hill*s (2002)

ONE--Character Strengths
1--Truth and Integrity (virtues)
You're someone special but you're not so special.
Trust yourself but don't trust yourself.

"Cognitive dissonance is one of the most relevant social psychology concepts that can help us to understand our prevarication tendencies (i.e. evading or distorting the truth, lying) as we try to practice integrity and accountability well. It refers to the disturbing, internal incongruence that we feel as we try to harmonize discrepant thoughts about ourselves. Tavris and Aronson in *Mistakes Were Made But Not By Me* (2007) shed light on how these moral maneuvers help us feel good about ourselves."

'Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification….That is why self-justification is more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie. It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. (pp. 2, 4)

Now between the conscious lie to fool others and unconscious self-justification to fool ourselves lies a fascinating gray area, patrolled by that unreliable, self-serving historian—memory. Memories are often pruned and shaped by an ego-enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened…Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in and we forget or distort past events, we may come to believe our own lies, little by little. (p. 6)

Yet mindless self-justification, like quicksand, can draw us deeper into disaster. It blocks our ability to even see our errors, let alone correct them. It distorts reality, keeping us from getting all the information we need and assessing issues clearly. It prolongs and widens rifts between lovers, friends, and nations. It keeps us from letting go of unhealthy habits. It permits the guilty to avoid taking responsibility for their deeds.' (p. 9-10)"

Integrity and Accountability for United Nations Staff: Part One–Navigating the Terrain and Part Two—Staying the Course. Kelly in *UN Special* (March 2017 and April 2017)

2--Agency with Perseverance and Perspective
Including ambiguity tolerance and pragmatic idealism (settling for partial perfection and success)

'It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out." (Anne Frank, 26 August 1944—shortly before being arrested and taken to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she later died from typhus).

3--Wisdom and Humility
Bennett et al in Assessing and Managing Risk in Psychological Practice (2006) remind psychologists [and ourselves] that good practice is "hard work." We are encouraged to "Strive for excellence but not perfection" and to know that: You will make mistakes. You cannot help everyone. You will not know everything. You cannot go it alone. It is helpful to have a proper mix of confidence and humility." (p.5)

4--Compassion and Courage
Not only being "people of faith" but being people of "faith-hope-love"

Non hay tan buen tesoro como el bien facer nin tan precioso oro nin tan dulce placer.
Doing good is the greatest treasure, Better than gold, better than pleasure.
Sem Tob, 14th century, Spain
El sabio, con corona, como leon semeja; la verdad es Leona la mentira es gulpeja.
Wise people are like lions: Crowned in truth they hold their ground. But lying foxes run around
Sem Tob, 14th century, Spain

5--Appreciation and Gratitude
Etc.

ICRC, Geneva

TWO--Coping Skills
1--Self-care and awareness —nutrition, sleep, exercise, water, plus breathhig, 'centering', and avoid harmful use of alcohol plus excessive sugars, trans-fats, salts etc leading to 'lifestyle diseases'—NCDs
'mindfulness and centering practices

2--Boundaries and Balance
Saying "no" to say "yes"
Tools—Self-Care and Lifestyle Balance Inventory, Headington institute—reproduced on pages 46-48 in Module One: Introduction to stress, resilience, and self-care (2017).

3--Perspective and Pain
"Life is pain and anyone saying differently is selling something"
Princess Bride—movie video clip here

'This too will pass'—good or bad!

4—Interpersonal skills including managing dysfunction and deviance
Note Wise Doves and Innocent Serpents? Promoting Health and Confronting Dysfunction in the Mission Community

"It remains now to see what ought to be the rules of conduct for a prince towards subject and friends... for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity...And again, he need not make himself uneasy at incurring a reproach for those vices without which the state can only be saved with difficulty, for if everything is considered carefully, it will be found that something which looks like virtue, if followed, would be his ruin; whilst something else, which looks like vice, yet followed brings him security and prosperity."

The Prince, Chapter 15, Niccolò Machiavelli (written circa 1505, published 1515)

Etc.

THREE--Social Connections

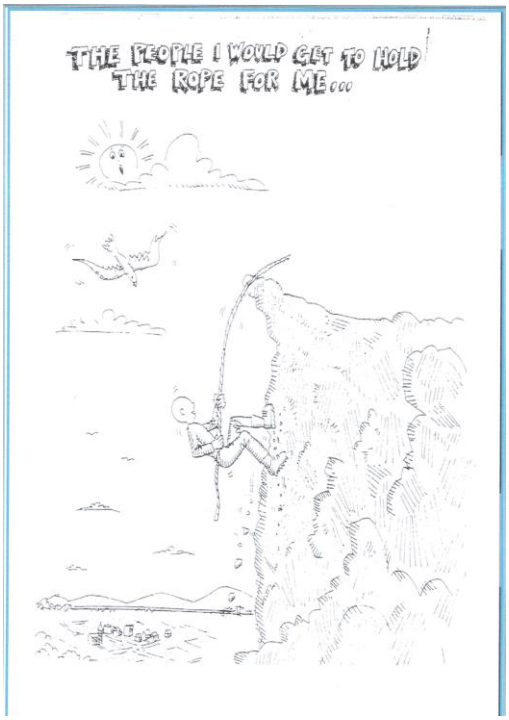
Sirac chapter 6 on friendship (*NRSV*)

6 Let those who are at peace with you be many, but let your advisers be one in a thousand.
7 When you gain friends, gain them through testing, and do not trust them hastily.
8 For there are friends who are such when it suits them but they will not stand by you in time of trouble.
9 And there are friends who turn to enmity and tell of the quarrel to your disgrace.
10 And there are friends who are companions at the table, but they will not stand by you in time of trouble.
11 When you are prosperous, they become your second self and boldly command your slaves,
12 but if you are brought low, they turn against you and hide themselves from you.
13 Keep away from your enemies, and be on guard with your friends.
14 Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one has found a treasure.
15 Faithful friends are beyond price; no amount can balance their worth.
16 Faithful friends are life-saving medicine, and those who fear the Lord will find them.
17 Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright, for as they are, so are their neighbors also.

1--Social support and mutual support

--One another verses in NT encourage one another

Cliff-rope exercise—who also would you want to hold the rope—or to not hold the rope
—and for who mare you holding the rope etc



2—Forgiveness

Et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris

Nouwen *'In this world love and wounds are never separated'*

3—Note Interpersonal Skills in Coping Skills above

Etc.

FOUR--Spiritual Core (like our thumb that can touch all the other fingers)
1--Transcendence and God
Pilgrimage to Rome—circa eight century Irish
To go to Rome is much trouble and little profit
for the King that you search for
unless you bring him with you
you will not find.

Ps 23—*The LORD restores the strengths of my soul*
His rod and staff are an infusion of encouragement

2--Beliefs and Values
World view and theology of suffering and life philosophy

"Beneath the surface of everyone's life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear — and for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity but of realism Beneath the surface of everyone's life, especially the more mature, is an ache that will not go away. It can be ignored, disguised, mislabeled, or submerged by a torrent of activity, but it will not disappear — and for good reason. We were designed to enjoy a better world than this. And until that better world comes along, we will groan for what we do not have. An aching soul is evidence not of neurosis or spiritual immaturity but of realism." Larry Crabb in *Inside Out* (p 14)

3--Purpose and Meaning
'It's not about you.**"** Rick Warren*, The Purpose Driven Life*

4--Beauty and Hope
The Biggest Little Book about Hope—Kathryn Goetske—like resilience hope is definable-measurable-teachable (develop it) "positive feeling and inspired action"
UN International Day of Hope—12 July

Etc.

FIVE--Supportive Care from Organisations
including wellbeing programs, security, organisational culture, and management

"[T]he most stressful events in humanitarian work have to do with the organizational culture, management style and operational objectives of an NGO or agency rather than external security risks or poor environmental factors. Aid workers, basically, have a pretty shrewd idea what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gunshots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them. Intra-and inter-agency politics, inconsistent management styles, lack of team work and unclear or conflicting organizational objectives, however, combine to create a background of chronic stress and pressure that over time wears people down and can lead to burnout and even physical collapse… Our findings suggest that strong relationships afford the best protection in traumatic and stressful environments." Fawcett (2003, page 6) quoted in Engaging in Humanity Care: Stress, Trauma, and Humanitarian Work

Etc.

Final Thoughts

"[Surprises, setbacks, failures of governance, abuses of human rights] should not deter us from responding as best we can, using our talents to improve this always mixed record of trying "to save generations from the scourge of war," to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights," and "to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom." The original Preamble in the Charter of the "United Nations had it right. The question is, can we do it?" "Can we really offer justice and freedom from want to a mid-twenty-first-century earth of perhaps nine billion people, one-third of whom may live in squalor and desperation? . . . The only answer, as I can see it, is by trying . . . and not giving up." The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations Paul Kennedy (2006, pages 279, 289)

Resilience is facing reality:
navigating and growing through the challenges, changes, and adversities in life;
b**ouncing back better and being refined through life's hardship and suffering, etc.**

Great to be with you—Stay the course!
Ad majorem Dei gloriam
Greetings from Kelly and Michèle O'Donnell