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Nurturing resilience

within the carer journey

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Introduction

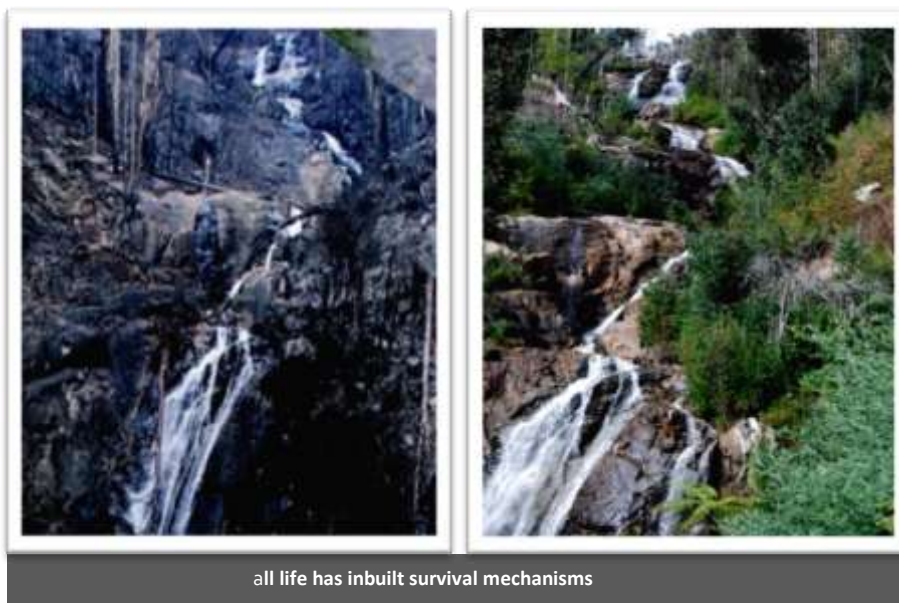
A common occurrence within the carer journey is that a carer is often thrust into the role without prior warning or preparation. For example: after a loved-one has had a debilitating stroke; has received an acquired brain injury due to an accident; has experienced paralysis due to an accident; has received a diagnosis of terminal cancer; has developed dementia; has developed a mental disorder which effects their ability to live well for an extended time. As a result of the unexpected nature of such circumstances, the carer does not have time to prepare for the role and over time their resilience may be stretched to breaking point.

The human spirit is known to be resilient, but under the above circumstances how may resilience be nurtured? Also, does resilience take the same form in each person? Is resilience an innate quality, or is it something that some people have and others do not? Are there ways to nurture resilience when we have reached breaking point? In response to those questions, this article will firstly offer some images and understandings which point to the nature of resilience as it is observed within wider creation and within human experience. From there, the article will offer some principles and practices for nurturing resilience specifically within the carer journey.

The nature of resilience

Resilience: as observed within wider creation

From the perspective of wider creation Anne Deveson states: "resilience is about evolution and survival, the capacity of all life-forms to endure . . . for all life has inbuilt survival mechanisms."¹ Such survival mechanisms allow for the possibility of adapting to adverse change. The two photos below illustrate something of such a dynamic. They were taken at Stevenson's Falls, Marysville, Victoria. The photo on the left was taken after the Black Saturday bushfires in February 2009. Notice the charred landscape. The photo on the right was taken approximately five years later. Notice the difference. New life has emerged. These photos reveal something of the nature of resilience, i.e., the capacity for living things to survive and adapt to adverse change.



photos by Robert Tyzzer

Is resilience purely about surviving and adapting? Such qualities imply being forced into letting go, or giving up, something. Could resilience include a quality beyond *letting go*? Could resilience also involve a quality of flourishing in response to adverse change? Again,

as we look through the lens of wider creation we see that flourishing in response to adverse change is also part of the nature of resilience. As the second photo (above) illustrates, *new* life has emerged and is flourishing. The emphasis here being on the *new*, as the landscape around the Falls is not the same as it was before the fire. Nonetheless, there is an expression of life; there is an expression of flourishing; there is an expression of thriving in a *new* way.

As we observe wider creation we see that resilience is experienced as the capacity to survive, adapt, and flourish in response to adverse change.

Resilience: as observed within human experience

As we observe wider creation we see that resilience is experienced as the innate capacity to survive, adapt, and flourish in response to adverse change. We humans are part of creation, so we too have the innate capacity to survive, adapt, and flourish in response to adverse change. How though does such an innate capacity take form in the human experience? (Note: within this article, human experience is viewed from a western cultural context.) Again from Deveson we find that initially researchers thought resilience was a quality or trait that some people possessed while others did not. Yet as they continued with their research, they came to understand that within the human person, as within the wider creation, resilience is experienced as an innate self-righting life force.

Such an innate self-righting life force encompasses two areas. The first area relates to our outer circumstances, i.e., the practical ways we find to live with the change. The second area relates to our inner being, i.e., that part of us which seeks meaning and purpose in our living. It makes sense that resilience relates to both our outer circumstances and inner being, for they are like two sides of the one coin.

Two ways in which resilience takes shape within our inner being:

1. *Springing back into the same shape*

The dictionary defines the term resilience as the ability to *spring back*. Such an understanding implies buoyancy and elasticity. Such an understanding also implies the ability to spring back to the same shape. One example of springing back into the same shape is that of the slinky, a child's toy. A slinky is a long spring which can be pulled out to its full length and when let go it will spring back into its former shape. In a similar



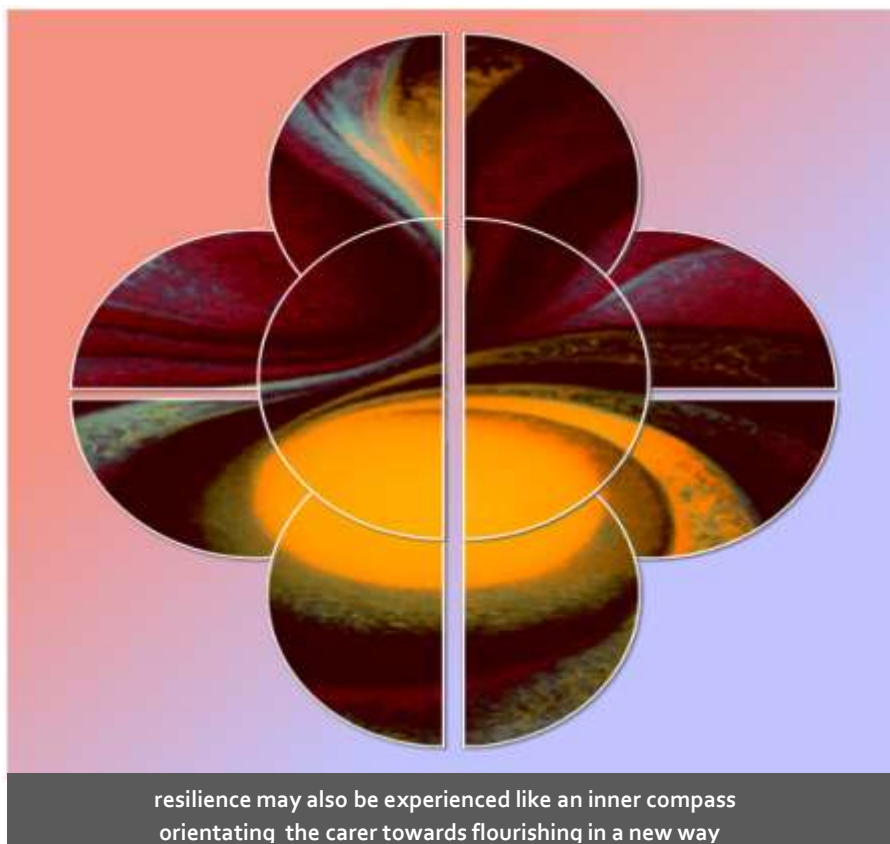
resilience may be experienced as *springing back into the same shape*

manner to the slinky, some people facing challenging circumstances have the capacity to simply continue on with daily life. Even though their resilience may be stretched, they have the capacity to absorb the shock with their inner being intact.ⁱⁱ For them, resilience takes the form of springing back into their same shape and they simply get with life in the way that they have always done.

2. Like an inner compass orientating the carer towards discovering new understandings.

While some people may experience resilience in the form of springing back into the same shape, most are unable to do so. Why? Because their inner being cannot absorb the shock and remain intact. It is as if their inner being breaks open into tiny jigsaw pieces strewn around. As a result, they may experience a sense of inner disorientation. They may even experience a crisis of meaning. In terms of the carer journey, it is quite possible that the carer experiences a parallel journey of inner disorientation to that of their loved one, for both lives have now changed. Therefore, both may experience inner disorientation in their own ways. In turn, questions around personal identity, purpose, and belonging that were perhaps once dormant, now emerge into conscious view, for both of them..

When such an experience of inner disorientation occurs within a carer, resilience is experienced like an inner compass orientating them towards discovering new understandings to their meaning making questions; questions around, "Who am I now?" "What is my purpose now?" "How do I belong in my world now?" For some people there may also be the question, "Where is God in this?" Therefore, in the process of placing the pieces of their life back together, the carer engages with their spiritual questions in a way that leads towards personal transformation. As a consequence, rather than regaining their former Self, the carer transcends their former Self; they experience flourishing in a new way.



resilience may also be experienced like an inner compass orientating the carer towards flourishing in a new way

Artwork by Kaye Twining

Qualities within resilience

In terms of resilience being an inner compass orientating the carer towards flourishing in a new way, there are three particular qualities which sustain them on the inner journey. Those

qualities are: 1. endurance 2. determination 3. acceptance.ⁱⁱⁱ Those three qualities do not equate to an attitude of: "*this is a cross that I must bear.*" Such an attitude leads toward the experience of stoically shouldering a heavy burden, the weight of which becomes more onerous as the years progress. Rather, resilience is known to be life affirming and the qualities of endurance, determination, and acceptance are qualities which assist the carer to healthily respond to the changes in their outer circumstances and inner being. As a consequence, resilience allows them to *walk lightly* within the ever changing journey of the carer role.

Resilience allows the carer to *walk lightly* within the ever changing journey of the carer role.

Summary of the nature of resilience

Resilience is known to be an innate, life affirming mechanism for self-righting. Resilience is experienced as the capacity to survive, adapt, and flourish in response to times of change and upheaval in our outer circumstances and inner being. Resilience takes form in two ways:

1. bouncing back into the same shape
2. transformational shifts in our experience of personal and communal identity, purpose, and belonging in the world.

In light of such an understanding, the following practices are offered for the carer.

The practices relate to periods of surviving a crisis, adapting to the changes, and then to flourishing. It is important to note that surviving, adapting, and flourishing are not usually one-time occurrences within the carer journey. Why? Because changes in the loved-one's condition may necessitate re-entering periods of surviving, adapting and flourishing.

Practices for Surviving a Crisis

Resting in the Quiet



Surviving: resting in the Quiet

When a loved-one is experiencing a life-death situation, or having a major medical treatment, or a particular episode of a mental disorder is reaching breaking point, the carer is thrust into a time of crisis that simply needs to be survived. How is resilience nurtured during such times?

Firstly: recognize and name the time as a crisis. Crisis periods do not call for heroics from the carer in either their outer world or their inner being. Crisis periods call for self-

compassion and doing what is required to be done and no more. To be able to name the period as one of crisis can set an internal switch which allows the carer to employ self care.

Crisis periods call for self-compassion and doing what is required to be done and no more.

Secondly: bodily relaxation. When experiencing a crisis the body reacts by engaging its inner fight/flight/freeze response. As a result a carer may experience a constant feeling of being *on-guard*, with their body holding tremendous tension.

In-the-moment practices for releasing tension: 1. tensing a body part and then releasing; 2. belly breathing; 3. breathing in deeply and on the outbreath saying Ahh . . .

Structured practices for releasing tension in the body: any form of physical exercise the carer can muster the energy for. For example: walking, yoga, tai chi. Also taking time for a reiki or massage session.

Thirdly: resting in Stillness. At the same time as a carer's body may be holding great tension, the shock of the loved-one's condition may leave the carer with a feeling of *the wind being knocked out of their sails* so to speak. At such times it is possible to consciously choose to allow that feeling to be metaphorically *held* within Stillness. Terms synonymous with Stillness are: the present moment, the Now, God, Spirit, Light, the gentling light of lovingkindness. So rather than fight against, or try to repress the feelings, the carer can acknowledge how they are feeling and invite Stillness into their felt experience. As they continue with such a practice, they may experience inner rest into which the feelings related to shock become bearable. As a carer chooses to rest in Stillness they are respecting the reality of their current experience while also offering a moment's peace to their body, their mind, and their emotions.

In-the-moment practices for resting in Stillness: 1. take moments in the day to bring your awareness into the present moment; 2. in time with your breathing gently invite your inner Self to *be still*; 3. choose to gaze into something you find beautiful. For example: nature; your pets; your children's/grandchildren's faces; artwork.

Structured practices for finding inner Stillness amidst the crisis: 1. silent meditation; 2. centering prayer;^{iv} 3. listening to a guided meditation; 4. listening to music that *stills* your being.



finding inner Stillness amidst the crisis

Practices for Adapting to Change

Finding inner shelter



Adapting: finding inner shelter

Once a carer has survived a crisis period, the focus turns to adapting. Adaptation revolves around the question, “how do the practicalities of life work now?” Such a question arises in response to the many changes which may have taken place in the life of the carer. For example: they may have had to put their career on hold, taken a different career path, or let their career go altogether. In turn they may experience changes in their financial situation which may make changes to the way they now live. Also, they may experience changes in their relationship with their loved-one, and/or changes in friendship groups. Additionally, they may experience changes in their daily routine which in itself may be disorientating. So a carer may face many changes in their outer world. With change comes feelings of loss.

Conscious grieving

A healthy response to loss is to grieve; to grieve consciously that is. All the same, what does conscious grieving have to do with resiliency? When we grieve consciously we are being emotionally honest. According to Deveson, emotional honesty nurtures resilience.^v In line with Deveson, Michael Neenan^{vi} writes: “resilience is not characterized by the absence of emotion. The only way that you can have an unemotional response to an event is if you truly don’t care what has happened to you because the event has absolutely no significance to you.” Therefore resilience is not characterized by a lack of emotion.

In response to adapting to the carer journey the carer may well experience feelings of anger, sorrow, helplessness, guilt, fear, and even dread. Such feelings are a natural part of grieving. While the carer may struggle to name the feelings, they may notice that their body feels weary, or the tone of their voice has a bit of an edge to it, or when they sit down in a coffee shop tears flow freely for no particular reason. Virginia Lafond contends that if we allow those feelings to be part of conscious grieving, they become the entry point to healthily accepting our changed circumstances. In turn, the carer may be open to see new possibilities.^{vii} Therefore, conscious grieving is a natural component of resiliency.

If we allow those feelings to be part of conscious grieving, they become the entry point to healthily accepting the changed circumstances. In turn, the carer may be open to see new possibilities. Virginia Lafond

A cautionary note: emotional honesty does not mean that we acknowledge we are angry and in response kick the dog! Neither does it mean that we vent our feelings on the loved-one we are caring for. They are carrying enough without carrying our emotional responses as well. Also, we may fear that if we open the door to what we are truly feeling we will be overwhelmed by the emotions, or act out of them in ways which are unhealthy for everyone concerned. How then do we consciously grieve without either acting out of or repressing our grief?



conscious grieving is a natural component of resilience

photo by Kaye Twining

In-the-moment practice for conscious grieving: This practice is drawn from the teachings of Buddhist nun Pema Chodron.^{viii} Take moments throughout the day to drop the storyline you are telling yourself, i.e., the thoughts that keep circling within your mind, and *gently lean into* your present moment emotional response. Such a practice may seem counter-intuitive. Nevertheless, while it may seem difficult or unpleasant, the practice allows us to experience emotional honesty while at the same time the pressure of our emotional response is being gently released. So, rather than acting out of, or pulling back from the emotion, we simply notice it and as far as we are able, we metaphorically *lean in towards* it. As we learn over time to trust this process, we find that this practice offers us a *place of inner shelter*.

Structured practice for finding a place of inner shelter: Sitting Meditation^{ix} is one practice which underpins the above in-the-moment practice. An important feature of the practice is to realize that while we have emotional responses, we are not totally identified/enmeshed with them. (Note: emotional responses include our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.) Through the practice of sitting meditation we learn that our emotional responses simply arise and dissolve like waves in the ocean if we do not *entertain* them.

A place of inner shelter is experienced when we realize we have thoughts and feelings, without being totally identified/enmeshed with them.

Sitting meditation: Make yourself comfortable on a chair or the floor. The practice involves letting your awareness gently follow each outbreath. When you notice yourself thinking or feeling, nonjudgmentally acknowledge it and bring your attention back to your outbreath. It does not matter how often you notice yourself thinking or feeling. The key to this practice is the noticing and dis-engaging.

Practices for Flourishing in a new way

Listening for inner wisdom's invitation towards transformation



Flourishing: listening for inner wisdom's invitation towards transformation

Once a carer learns to recognize their emotional responses (felt experience) without entertaining them, they may experience a shift in their inner Self from metaphorically *fighting against* the changes experienced, to posing the open-ended question: "How may I grow in wisdom and compassion through this?"^x Further open-ended questions within such an overarching question are: "Who do I now know myself to be?" "How do I now find meaning?" "How do I now experience belonging in my world?" Drawing upon the qualities within resilience of endurance, determination, and acceptance, the carer gently explores their questions with the intention of listening for inner wisdom's invitation towards transformational shifts in who they *now* know their Self to be in their world and how they *now* take their place within it.

Structured practices for flourishing:

1. Contemplative Self enquiry. Contemplative Self enquiry guides us through a personal inner journey of Self discovery, within the gentling light of lovingkindness. The practice draws from, and flows back into, our daily lives and encompasses an attitude of openness, curiosity, and nonjudgmental exploration.
2. The ongoing practice of spiritual mentoring can be valuable. Spiritual mentoring is not a therapist/client relationship, rather an ancient spiritual practice reclaimed for our Time. In its reclaimed form spiritual mentoring is an ongoing contemplative practice which involves an individual meeting monthly with a qualified spiritual mentor in order to discover, express, explore, integrate, and celebrate their own responses to their own spiritual questions around personal and communal identity, purpose, and belonging.

For guidelines to these practice see [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices/Contemplative Self enquiry & Spiritual mentoring](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative_practices/Contemplative_Self_enquiry_&_Spiritual_mentoring).

RESOURCES

- ⁱ Anne Deveson, *Resilience*
- ⁱⁱ Michael Neenan, *Developing Resilience*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Deveson, *Resilience*
- ^{iv} For the practice of Centering Prayer see www.centeringprayer.com
- ^v Anne Deveson, *Resilience*
- ^{vi} Michael Neenan, *Developing Resilience*
- ^{vii} While Lafond writes specifically about grieving mental illness, her understandings can be applied across a broad spectrum. Virginia Lafond, *Grieving Mental Illness: A guide for Patients and their Caregivers*
- ^{viii} Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the path of Lovingkindness*
- ^{ix} For more on the practice of Sitting Meditation see Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom*
- ^x Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom*

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