

**RESILIENCE,
NEUROPLASTICITY,
AND THE
CHRISTIAN
SPIRITUAL LIFE**

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RESILIENCE, NEUROPLASTICITY, AND THE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL LIFE

The Resilient Blowtorch!

For those who have read or are about to read “That Flame in your Heart? Turn it into a Blowtorch!”, the question of how to remain resilient in the face of spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical adversity can arise within us. Even with the best of intentions arising from our prayer and dialogue with the Person of Jesus Christ it can be challenging. Keeping the Blowtorch of God’s Love burning so brightly that it burns out all our pain, sorrow, defects, weaknesses and even our very humanity, purifying our heart, leaving only Him in its place, is our goal, so that others catch the Fire of His Love from us!

This guide provides some insight that may be useful to the reader of the book who is interested in maintaining the ‘reignited spiritual life’ as a result of doing the program and prayer journal. It is one thing to have faith. It is another to build virtue on sound principles of human and spiritual development. To the degree that one can build human and spiritual muscle to fortify the gift of faith in the face of the many tempests and trials that are part of our human condition, we can better withstand them and grow even more.

I hope the following discussion is of use to you as you progress allowing God to reignite your spiritual life to a degree you have never known, keeping the Blowtorch burning so brightly within you that all may see it and be attracted to Him!

The Foundations

Over the years, many people have commented to me that they wondered how I kept going and remained optimistic in the face of the difficulties I have experienced. Until recently, I used to reply that while I lacked most virtues, the one thing I think I had, if nothing else was faith. My faith in God when all else, including my own efforts, failed, sustained me. But the term 'faith' by itself does not seem to adequately encompass why I have been able to remain positive and optimistic (albeit with failures to be sure) through extraordinarily difficult periods of my life when others expected another response. As a matter of fact, any other response, like despair, depression, anger, etc. would have been normal and natural. The term I have come across lately that does a better job of describing a characteristic I firmly believe I have is one of resilience, and in particular, spiritual resilience.

What is resilience and why is it important in the life of the Christian?

In purely secular terms, resilience is the ability to remain positive mentally and emotionally in the face of adversity. (Arden, 2010)

For the Christian, spiritual resilience, which goes well beyond just being positive, is a core essential to living a life of faith. One need only look at the early Christians undergoing persecution starting with St. Stephen to see shining examples of spiritual resilience. Living spiritual resilience, a life of faith, means living in love, with hope and trusting God is in complete control of every detail of our life, no matter what is happening. It is our witness of resiliency in every circumstance of our life, particularly when it involves trial and suffering, that bears witness to our faith and attracts others to the faith in Jesus Christ. It was the resilience of the Apostles and early Christians, especially under extreme persecution, which stood in sharp contrast against the prevailing culture which attracted multitudes to the faith. No 'eye for an eye' was evident in their resilience, rather hearts full of love and hope trusting Jesus was

present and in control. The martyrs of the church through the centuries have demonstrated extreme resilience as they went to their death joyfully, affirming their trust in God's Providence.

Resilience requires a degree of dispassionate detachment from the current circumstances of our lives as we see it from the larger perspective. In secular terms, we might say that we are looking at our life from the 40,000 foot level. But in our relationship with Jesus, it is so much more than that, because in that relationship, as we hope to love as He loves, we can see as He sees. And the way He sees our lives is with love and compassion. As we see with His perspective, it is much broader than just the current circumstance; He is seeing our situation as part of our journey toward Him and eternity.

But how do we as ordinary Christians develop spiritual resiliency that will carry us through any adversity? After all, it is not just a choice and then we have the ability, rather, it is something that must be developed in our lives. In the terms of the science of neuroplasticity, we can undertake the task of rewiring our brains to develop spiritual resilience using the principles of neuroplasticity. That will be covered in some detail, but the development of spiritual resilience is an exercise in neuroplasticity.

There are a number of essential practices to the development of spiritual resilience:

1. A study of the Passion of Jesus
2. Prayer
3. Openness to the Father's Will
4. The Practice of Asceticism
5. Perseverance of Belief
6. Application of Neuroplasticity Principles
6. Community of Believers

Study

The development of spiritual resilience begins and ends with a study, a contemplation, of the Passion of Jesus, beginning at the Last Supper and culminating in His crucifixion. As a starting point, when we examine His example of resilience, we see His focus on doing the Will of the Father first and foremost and demonstrating His Love for us in doing that. Though suffering unspeakable brutality and falling under the weight of the Cross, His joy exemplified by His peace and serenity in the midst of suffering, remained. “Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children....,” He said to the women (Luke 23:28). He is firmly established in the Father’s Will for Him, even in the midst of human failure as His humanity crashes to the dirt under the weight of the Cross and He is unable to get up under His own power, but must be lifted up by bystanders and helped to carry His Cross by Simon.

Throughout His Passion not once did he give in to the temptations of despair, anger, resentment, bitterness, revenge, hate, contempt or self-pity. He remained steadfast in His love, mercy, and compassion, even for those torturing and killing Him.

So we study the example of Christ during His Passion as One we can admire and hope to emulate as our role model. It is His example of resiliency which stands as the ultimate example resilience.

And role modeling when it comes to resilience is essential to cultivating it in our own lives. In the traditional language of Christians, we imitate Jesus (Ephesians 5:1). It begins with Him and culminates with Him. No saint or martyr became that without role modeling Jesus in His Passion. And role modeling is a normal and natural function of human development. Nothing is more natural to our development as emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual beings than role modeling, beginning with our parental examples and throughout our lives.

Prayer

The second element of cultivating spiritual resilience in our lives is prayer – the communion of our souls with God. It is only in prayer that we develop a relationship with God, grow to know Him and develop our trust of Him. As we grow in our communion with God, we gain a clearer understanding of His Will for us. Sure knowledge that we are completely open and at least trying to do the Will of God, to the best of our ability is essential to resilience. I cannot expect to adequately role model Him if I do not know Him and the better I know Him, the closer I know His Heart and Mind, the better I am able to role model Him. For that only contemplative prayer, the prayer of the saints who contemplated the life of Jesus and role modeled Him will lead us to that knowledge.

Openness

Prayer and the emulation of the example of Jesus lead us to the third element of spiritual resilience and that is Openness to the Father's Will. It is in prayer, our union and communion with Jesus, in the midst of our circumstances, no matter what is going on, that we open ourselves to the Will of the Father, no matter what it entails for us. It is a place of deep defenselessness, losing all our resistances and self-will as we turn to Him and repeat, "Father, not my will, but Your Will be done in me!" (Mark 14:36).

When we live that kind of radical openness to the Will of the Father, without any resistance and in fact full cooperation, we have confidence in His merciful and compassionate Will for us. Yes, we imperfectly understand His Will, because we are limited, but we can understand it to the degree He reveals it and in that we can be confident. In humility we know that we do not need to understand the full extent of His Will or the reasons for His Will, only part of His Will He has chosen to reveal to us. Our complete openness with humility of limited understanding leads to a deep-seated confidence in God's Will for our life. That confidence is fundamental to spiritual resiliency.

Asceticism

The next element of resilience is the practice of asceticism. A quick definition: the abstinence from worldly pleasures or natural inclinations of the nature for the pursuit of spiritual growth. Those asceticisms most often involve some sort of restraint with respect to the mind, emotions, senses or body. Asceticism has a very long history in the Church and in Jewish practices, the practice of self-disciplines or denials to gain mastery over the weaknesses of the flesh. Fasting has always been the most prominent form of ascetic practice, and in broad terms, one can fast with respect to any of the previously listed areas of restraint.

With regard to resilience, the practice of asceticism involves learning to deny ourselves the natural reactions that accompany adversity. A much larger discussion of the practice of asceticism in the development of the spiritual life of a Christian is needed but suffice it to say that any Christian serious about developing an active spiritual life should be practicing some form of asceticism on an ongoing basis in their daily life. It is critical to the development of spiritual muscle so that saying no to yourself and your desires, as normal and natural as they are, becomes ingrained and can be exercised in times of temptation.

One more aspect of asceticism: when you deny yourself a normal and natural response or pleasure, it opens a place, or better, a space for God if you make the choice to replace the space with Him. When practiced in an ongoing form, like some small fast of some type, we make a continuous place for Him in our very nature, our flesh as it were.

Asceticism develops the spiritual muscle for resilience. We are able to say no to the natural instincts and reactions to our experiences of adversity in whatever form they come, and to be able to maintain our joy, hope, optimism and trust in God, no matter what is happening in our life, no matter what the adversity or suffering or confusion. It gives us the spiritual muscle to make the decision in the critical moments when we are tempted in our human frailty to give

in, to transcend our nature and place all our hope and trust in God – and do it over and over again in an exercise of perseverance.

Perseverance

Perseverance or tenacity in holding fast to our belief in God and His Will for us in all circumstances of life means we do not give in to our human frailties or any temptations to abandon our hope, trust, joy and optimism that God will safely guide us home to Himself. When we persevere in the face of trial, it looks like courage or self-assurance, but we know it to be the simplicity of child-like trust in God. It is a place of deep humility, disregarding the lashing storm about or within us and staying focused on the beacon which is Him walking across the water toward us (Mark 6:48).

When we persevere in our belief in God, in all circumstances, over and over again from the smallest of details in our lives we build the spiritual resilience muscle, we cultivate its development in our lives. It is not an overnight accomplishment, but something we grow into. Getting delayed in traffic and trusting that God is in control and all will work out is a tiny beginning in the tenacity we need to develop to hold firm in our faith. One begins with a dozen sit-ups and then increases it over time before you can do two hundred. Start small and work on it over and over again – persevere in it over time, regardless of how many times you fail at it, building on your successes.

Neuroplasticity

The science of neuroplasticity tells us that we can rewire our brains by making a conscious decision and repeated efforts over time to think, react or even exercise bodily functions differently. All of the above discussion is foundational to the application of the principles of neuroplasticity to the spiritual life.

Fundamentally, what we now know from biological, biochemical and psychological sciences over the last ten years is that it is possible to rewire even some of the most basic parts of our humanity. We know that it took rewiring to learn how to walk, or ride a bicycle, but it is also what the military and first responders depend on during their training of people to function effectively in the most dangerous situations. Controlling one's pulse and breathing in 'fight or flight' circumstances to focus on a larger mission even at the risk of death is foundational rewiring necessary to be effective in those roles.

So it is with the Christian in developing spiritual resilience. Gone is the focus on self, but rather God's Will and the larger mission He has in mind for us. Here is the place for the dispassionate detachment from our own concerns, but rather we see our journey as just that, a place of continuous growth and development and a trust that with God's grace, we can rewire our brains to become more and more spiritually resilient over time. "For I am convinced that ... [nothing] ... can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38).

The science of neuroplasticity tells us we can rewire our brains for spiritual resilience and with the help of God's grace do it in ways and in circumstances that others would find impossible! Praise the Lord!

Community

One of the core principles of both Christianity and neuroplasticity is social connection. For Christians, it is the community of believers we come together with to worship, praise, pray, serve and fellowship. "For where two or three are gathered in my name..." (Matthew 18:20) The science of neuroplasticity tells us that positive social connection is positive medicine for the brain and has profound effects mentally, psychologically, and physically. Positive social connection rewires the brain for joy and optimism.

Spiritual resiliency is perfected in a positive social connection of a community of believers. Note the focus on the essential element of 'positive' as there are unfortunately many examples of negative. When the community of believers comes together in affirming ways to provide encouragement each of the elements of spiritual resilience are encouraged and reinforced. We do not proceed to the goal without the team, the community of believers who not only provide every type of human support, and role models, but also intercede to God for us to grow in our resilience. What more could we want in our development of spiritual resilience than the community of believers in Jesus Christ to support us?

Spiritual Resiliency as a Trait

You learned to walk or ride a bicycle by falling down. Olympic athletes fail too many times to count on their way to the gold medal. So it is with anything you want to achieve. Spiritual resiliency is fundamental to a growth in holiness to which every Christian is called. But along the way, we will encounter much failure. That is not a reason to quit, at all, but the very reason to keep going! We learn one more way in which not to do it and as complex as our natures are, there are certainly a lot of ways we need to learn how not to do it.

But the real focus on developing spiritual resiliency as a trait, and enduring part of our being, is the celebration of our little successes along the way. Focus on those times when you overcame the temptation to give up and trusted God, remaining joyful and optimistic in the midst of a trial. One can even begin with small annoyances as I alluded to earlier, such as delays in traffic. Begin with the small matters, pay attention to them and reinforce the successes. No jet pilot, astronaut, professional athlete or saint achieved what they did without both learning from the mistakes and working hard on reinforcing the successes.

'They will know we are Christians by our love', by our love, joy, peace and serenity in every circumstance through our spiritual resilience.

Role of Sacraments

I cannot end without a note to the Catholic reader regarding the role of the Sacraments in this process. For those who are Catholic, the journey of faith is greatly enhanced by the availability of the sacraments from which you can draw strength and comfort as grace works in the depths of your soul hidden and unseen to all except to God Himself. It seems that both the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are key to having the strength we need each day and the channel of grace to help us bounce back when we fail. Availing ourselves of the Sacraments frequently is to draw upon all the storehouses of God's infinite mercy and love.

***Out of the darkness of my life, so
much frustrated,
I put before you
the one great thing to love on earth:***

the Blessed Sacrament ...

***There you will find romance, glory,
honour, fidelity, and the true way of all
your loves on earth...***

- JRR Tolkien, author, Lord of the
Rings, The Hobbit and others

There is more to be said here about the role of the Sacraments than can possibly be said or written, even if one were to fill all the libraries of the world. So I will simply say, as a Catholic, you can never go wrong depending on the basics of your faith including the Sacraments.

Spiritual Resiliency and Neuroplasticity

Setting our hearts and minds on the goal of developing spiritual resiliency has to start from the place of poverty of spirit before God as His servants, because every good thing comes from the hand of God. (James 1:17) If we come to Him begging for a resilient spirit so as to serve Him and glorify Him in every moment and every circumstance of our lives, we are sure to please Him with that request. How and when He chooses to grace us is His decision, but surely He will do it as He holds nothing back for those who pursue Him with singular focus.

The beautiful thing is we have very powerful principles of human development, particularly within the science of neuroplasticity, that give us insight into how in our humanity, we can cooperate more effectively with God's grace. We can reprogram our brains in very determined ways using sound principles we have outlined to develop greater resilience. If you want to explore neuroplasticity further, I would recommend "Rewire Your Brain" by John B. Arden, PhD. It is a secular treatment of the science, but is well documented and certainly applicable to the spiritual life.

May your spiritual resilience grow within you so that the fire of God's Love burns within you so brightly that it becomes a Blowtorch, apparent to everyone in every circumstance of your life, no matter how challenging it is!

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David Leis, the author of the book, *"That Flame in your Heart? Turn it into a Blowtorch!"*, is an award-winning consultant, author, speaker, trainer, executive coach, and college instructor. For over 30 years, he has spoken to and trained thousands of people in a wide variety of settings, from colleges to the Fortune 500 to small companies and non-profits around the globe. David lives near Princeton, New Jersey, with his two sons and close to his daughter's family in Connecticut. You may contact him at www.turnitintoablowltorch.com