

Sermon 1 12 2014 The Wizard of Resilience

There are transformations that seem almost supernatural. Every day veterans of our nation's wars return home to families and communities that have spent years in their absence. Most of them left for combat as children, more or less, having just finished high school, 18 and fresh faced. They change their jeans and sneakers for beige camouflage, heavy helmets and uniform boots fit for the cold, jagged mountains of Afghanistan. Months after they danced to Justin Beiber and Beyoncé at the prom they find themselves negotiating with nomadic goat herders in high altitudes, or guarding munitions as Afghani children kick around a soccer ball made from old clothes and glue. Listening to the Muslim call to prayer echo from the metal box that serves as their temporary home.

Let's put aside for a moment our complicated feelings about our nation's military, armed combat, peace and the role of oil in our foreign policy, and consider simply the transformation these kids make- the class clown who never made it to first period in time now distributes clean water to hillside tribes in the Himalayas' at 20,000 feet. The loner smoking in the girl's bathroom hikes for thirty miles at a time carrying a heavy load of supplies for her outpost. The young people in the military transform very quickly from teenagers into soldiers. But what about when they return to the United States? How do they transform back?

Every month our congregation engages in a different theme, both here in the service and in small groups called chalice circles that meet during the week. This month our topic is resilience. Did you ever do the experiment in science class where you drop an egg off the roof of the school onto a bed sheet pulled taut? The egg doesn't break but bounces, hitting the sheet and remaining whole, rebounding into the air. That is how I picture resilience- the ability to bounce when dropped, to resist cracking and shoot back into the air.

Resilience is as necessary as oxygen to our lives. Throughout our days we are all hit, now and again, with misfortune, tragedy, or just plain bad luck. We can't control that- life is mysterious and sometimes very difficult. We get a parking ticket, lose a job, end a relationship. Someone we love dies unexpectedly. Most of the hardships in life are out of our hands. What we can control is our reaction to misfortune. How do we rebound? Do we shoot back into the air, or crack on the pavement? Are we resilient?

Every day a returning US soldier commits suicide. Every single day. The reasons are as diverse as the soldiers themselves, but they mostly have to do with culture shock. These young people left home and moved to a different world, culturally, and lived a lifestyle of structure and stress. The soldiers had few choices; they ate,

slept, worked and played when instructed. Our young people lived in close quarters and adjusted to a life with little to no solitude but a great deal of camaraderie. They lived in high-stress environments where they could be killed at any moment. Many saw friends killed. Some killed other people and are struggling to come to terms with that action. Many soldiers return with physical injuries, others with untreated mental illness. And one and all they are dropped back into civilian life, expected to be who they were before this life-altering experience, expected to find a job and get back to normal. But what is normal to a person who went from high school to war in Afghanistan?

For our returning soldiers reentry can feel like that egg tossed from on high, but without the sheet to catch it. Fortunately some end up on Green Gulch farm, just over the Golden Gate Bridge. The farm is an offshoot of the San Francisco Zen Center, one of their efforts to serve, not only by teaching Zen but in growing organic food and inviting soldiers with PTSD- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder- to come revive their resilience on retreat.

At Green Gulch resilience is cultivated. Like the organic beets and broccoli grown on the farm, resilience is a thing that has to be nurtured, coaxed, and fed. Yes, we all have some level of resilience, but it can be a delicate sprout or as bountiful as

the bushels of wild chamomile waving in the wind at Green Gulch. How can we grow our resilience?

It may sound counter-intuitive, but it is through cultivating detachment.

Detachment, the center of all Buddhist practice, isn't easy and is often misunderstood, but it is essential to building our resilience. Detachment means realizing that everything around us is temporary, everything here will one day be gone. The people we love under this dome, the dome itself, even our green orchard, which seems to pulse with wet, chaotic, joyful life- all of this will pass away. Detachment doesn't mean we shouldn't love our friends under this dome, we should love them even more mindfully, savoring them- but accepting that one day they will be no more.

Cultivating detachment can actually be fun. At Green Gulch former soldiers are asked to picture a time they felt really safe. To hold that moment in their mind- what does safe feel like? One young man remembered lying on the hot concrete on a sunny day, the rays drying him after a swim in a chilly pool. Another recalls her grandfather's farm, the feel of bark against her back as she sat under the shading branches of a date tree. My spiritual companions, what does safe feel like to you?

Let's close our eyes a moment and remember when we felt secure. Recently, or long ago- when were you safe? Just for a moment, be there. Do you remember?

But what does safe have to do with detachment? Well, the soldier's most recent feelings have all been of stress- the stress of combat, of life under fire, and then coming home to family expectations, looking for work. But detachment shows us- all our distress is temporary, all discomfort is temporary. You felt safe before, you will feel safe again. Nothing, good or bad, is forever. Remembering our ability to ride the waves of life- from safe to less safe, from happy to traumatized and back to happy- recalls our resilience, encourages it to flourish. Look at all we have come through- surely this too shall pass.

Detachment doesn't mean not caring, it doesn't mean abstaining from emotions or experiences. Detachment doesn't mean we should all sit under the Bodhi tree and meditate for the rest of our lives, trying to feel nothing at all. It does mean that we remember our own mortality, our own fragile hold on what we call reality. It means that at Green Gulch soldiers walk around the farm smelling herbs like lavender and mint, crushed between their fingers, stroking lamb's ears, awake to the incredible glory of this place, awake to the incredible reality of its temporary nature.

Which brings me to the Wizard of Oz, my favorite of the classic musicals on TV every year around Christmas time. Have you all seen the Wizard of Oz? So remember with me the end of the movie. Dorothy discovers the Wizard is just a con man from Kansas, but he has a hot air balloon and he is willing to take her home. After her long journey Dorothy is finally heading home to Auntie Em. But at the last second tragedy strikes- Toto jumps out of the balloon's basket to chase a cat, and Dorothy takes off after him. The wizard, who really isn't such a great guy, takes off in the balloon without them, and Dorothy bursts into tears, afraid that now she will never get home. Fortunately another surprise is in store for our frustrated farm girl. Glenda, the bubble-gum pink witch floats in and gives Dorothy some truly philosophical wisdom—it's not about the wizard, it's not about magic and witches and munchkins- you have had the ability to go home all along. Just click your heels together three times and say 'There's no place like home.'

And so it is with resilience. You don't need a wizard or magic or witches- it's in you all the time. You always have the strength to ride the waves of life, just recall all the times you have overcome hardship before. You can access it most readily if you cultivate it, with mindfulness, with detachment.

For our returning soldiers it will take more than a weekend at Green Gulch to recover from PTSD. But as Glenda the Good Witch tells us, it is in them, the resilience is in them, and with the right tools they can access it. So it is too for us- our resilience is stoked by mindfulness, by crushing lavender and mint between our fingers and being with that scent, knowing it- like everything in our lives- is temporary.

In a moment we will pause for two minutes of silence, to meditate, pray, be with our thoughts. But before we do I want to reprise a bit of the poem Catherine read, as a benediction and a blessing for each of us, and for all the returning soldiers looking for a new way to find their home.

On the day when

The weight deadens

On your shoulders

And you stumble,

May the clay dance

To balance you.

And when your eyes

Freeze behind

The grey window

And the ghost of loss

Gets into you,

May a flock of colours,

Indigo, red, green

And azure blue,

Come to awaken in you

A meadow of delight.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,

May the clarity of light be yours,

May the fluency of the ocean be yours,

May the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow

Wind work these words

Of love around you,

An invisible cloak

To mind your life.