

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHANGE: CULTIVATING RESILIENCE AT THE POINT OF NO RETURN, By Carolyn Baker

Sunday, 26 July 2009

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?

I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?

God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,

And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?

The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do

To you and me, so take the lively air,

And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

What falls away is always. And is near. I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

~Theodore Roethke~

In his famous work "The Waking." Michigan poet, Theodore Roethke, offered sage advice for navigating unprecedented transitions and cultivating resilience. Wisely, the Transition Handbook by Rob Hopkins establishes three domains for people who are awake to these transitions as they endeavor to journey through them into a post-industrial world. Those domains are simply head, hand, and heart, and they refer to-learning: the facts regarding the challenges of Peak Oil and climate change, the mastery of skills necessary for survival in a post-petroleum world, and nurturance the nurturing of that which gives meaning and purpose to our lives in the Long Emergency . A preponderance of the literature addressing transition issues provides information for the head and hand, yet there is a dearth of illumination for the heart-support and validation for

our trembling souls as we consciously maneuver our lives and communities into a world humans have never before known.

While millions of our species have experienced the collapse of their civilizations, none before this generation has transitioned from an industrial to a post-industrial lifestyle. None has experienced resource depletion, energy decline, climate change, overpopulation, or broken economic systems in the same manner as that with which we are currently faced. Whether it occurs rapidly or slowly, the collapse of a civilization is always traumatic. Wherever we might be in the process, it is tempting to become pre-occupied with logistical preparation only, i.e., relocating to a sustainable area of the world, learning skills, acquiring tools, storing food, and much more. Yet if one does not address the interior world as well as the exterior, the journey may be immensely daunting, even overwhelming.

What Is Resilience?

For this reason, we must ponder the issue of internal resilience deeply and consciously cultivate it as diligently as we attend to matters of head and hand. Two possible definitions of resilience are:

**the power or ability to return to the original form, position, etc., after being bent, compressed, or stretched; elasticity.

**ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like; buoyancy.

In fact, resilience cannot remain simply a theory; it becomes very personal, very quickly.

Resiliency researcher, Albert Siebert, author of *The Resiliency Advantage* and *The Survivor Personality*, comments on what he has to say about internal psychological resilience:

Resilience is the process of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. Resilient people overcome adversity, bounce back from setbacks, and can thrive under extreme, on-going pressure without acting in dysfunctional or harmful ways. The most resilient people recover from traumatic experiences stronger, better, and wiser.

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Siebert posits five levels of internal resiliency:

*Maintaining one's emotional stability, health, and well being

*Focusing outward and developing good problem-solving skills. (research indicates that problem-focused coping leads to resiliency better than emotion-focused coping).

*Focusing inward and developing strong inner "selves" such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and a positive self-concept.

*Developing resiliency skills

*Developing the talent for serendipity, -the ability to convert misfortune into good fortune.1

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I highly recommend Siebert's article on "How To Develop Resiliency Strengths" which offers additional tools for cultivating this crucial psychological skill.0

<http://carolynbaker.net/site/content/view/1209/1/#_edn3>

Cognitive Dissonance and Resilience

It is important, I believe, in developing resilience, to understand that like any other skill, it is built up over time and through myriad experiences that test us on a variety of levels. As individuals begin to awaken to the realities of collapse, they almost immediately confront their own cognitive dissonance regarding the cultural milieu in which they live and the facts of industrial civilization's demise.

In the 1950s, social psychologist, Leon Festinger's research on cognitive dissonance revealed that "inconsistency among beliefs or behaviors will cause an uncomfortable psychological tension. This will lead people to change their beliefs to fit their actual behavior, rather than the other way around, as popular wisdom may suggest."⁰

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Such a response to cognitive dissonance is invariably linked with the defense mechanism of denial. For example, if I do not want to change my behavior in relation to the environment or fossil fuel consumption, I am likely to discount hard evidence regarding climate change and Peak Oil. If I rationally ponder such evidence, however, I may choose to change my behavior, or I may embark on a nihilistic path of "Eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow, we're all going to die."

Festinger's research concluded that to release the tension created by cognitive dissonance, we tend to do one of three things:

*Change our behavior.

*Justify our behavior by changing the conflicting cognition.

*Justify our behavior by adding new cognitions.2007-08-21 21:42:54

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I hasten to add that the process of confronting and dealing with our cognitive dissonance does not occur exclusively in the mind. Cognitive dissonance and our response to it is almost always emotionally charged and has everything to do with the emotional issues we bring to the dilemma. This is exceedingly important because these very issues may undermine our capacity for resilience.

Choosing to confront the reality of collapse and change our behavior catapults us immediately into a profound sense of loss, and the natural human response to loss is grief. During the 1960s, Swiss psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who pioneered modern research on death and dying, wrote extensively about the stages of grief encountered by humans as a result of loss. Kubler-Ross emphasizes that the stages do not necessarily unfold in a linear fashion but that we may experience two or more simultaneously or within hours or moments of each other.

The first stage, denial, is when we refuse to accept that loss is occurring. In the case of the collapse of civilization, we've all heard the litanies of denial and probably have a few of our own: Natural phenomena are causing climate change, not humans; there's plenty of oil-all we have to do is drill for it in the United States; the economy is in really bad shape now, but it always bounces back eventually; technology will find a way to fix this-the list is endless.

From denial we then move to anger, although frequently, the anger is veiled or misdirected. We may feel angry at our jobs or spouses or children, not fully aware that it is civilization itself with which we feel enraged for its multitudinous violations of our humanity. Or we may feel anger toward the messenger-the doomer/dystopic/downer who announces and articulates collapse in all its fullness. If we are fortunate, we begin to recognize that our anger is at civilization, with very good reason, and we focus our anger there, and stop blaming extraneous people and things.

As the reality of collapse bears down upon us, we may then begin bargaining with collapse or life or a higher power. With one foot still in the domain of denial, we think to ourselves, "If I drive a hybrid car, maybe I can continue living the lifestyle to which I have become accustomed; if I turn out all the lights in rooms I'm not using, maybe I can postpone the consequences of Peak Oil." We may resort to an endless cache of bargaining chips in order to avoid feeling the full emotional impact of collapse which resides in the next stage.

We can stay stuck in any one of the stages of loss, but genuine healing and empowerment are only possible when we fully open to grief—the one emotion that our denial, anger, and bargaining have been defending against. The most compelling and human response to the rape, pillage, and plunder of our planet is deep grief, and the beginning of healing occurs when we consciously open to it.

When we allow ourselves to grieve the innumerable losses which civilization has wrought, our bodies and psyches are freed to move through the grief to a place of acceptance and re-investment. As with the other stages, the last is a process, not an event—a process very different from "worry" because what we accept is not only the inevitability of collapse, but our powerlessness to stop it, as well as our limitations in avoiding its daunting repercussions. We accept that there are no guarantees, and as with any terminal illness, we have the opportunity to look fully into the face of our own mortality and beyond. Only then can we wisely re-invest in living our lives, regardless of outcome, which profoundly facilitates responding to collapse with grounded, prudent preparation.

To allow oneself to experience the various stages of grief is the first step in building resilience because it is a step in the direction of emotional maturity. Richard Heinberg has spoken and written on many occasions about the infantilization that pervades the culture of civilization which prevents us from coming to terms with negative events and emotions. As a result, the majority of humans behave like two year-olds who cannot accept limits in relation to economics, energy, or the environment.

In the documentary "The Great Squeeze" 2008-08-09 03:05:07
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James Howard Kunstler notes that Americans have lost a tragic sense of life. He explains that this does not mean a sense that everything is horrible, but rather, that we seem to have no sense of a beginning, a middle, and an end to our life experiences—as if we are entitled to endless quantities of money, energy, land, or whatever resources or things we desire.

From Infantilization to Initiation

We have the choice of waiting until that to which we feel we are entitled is ripped away from us gradually or suddenly, or adopting the attitudes of indigenous people who throughout human history have been intimately connected with the earth and therefore keenly aware of humanity's limits. In traditional cultures children are consciously launched into adulthood with carefully structured ceremonies of initiation which mark the end of childhood and the beginning of maturity. Throughout his or her adult life, the indigenous person deepens their connection with the land, with the tribe, and with traditions of ritual and celebration which give meaning and purpose to their human existence.

It is also understood in indigenous traditions that if an individual does not experience a conscious initiation structured and supported by the tribal community, he or she will nevertheless be initiated—by life, and in ways that may be much harsher and more alienating. I believe that the current collapse of industrial civilization is precisely such an initiation for all of our species.

What's Age Got To Do With It?

As the indigenous person ripens into old age, she or he prepares for elderhood which has little to do with age but everything to do with wisdom. In the culture of civilization one encounters elderly persons who are anything but elders due to their lack of wisdom and at the same time, very young persons who because of their depth of wisdom might aptly be called "elders." We could say that elderhood is about sagacity, not longevity.

A hallmark of indigenous wisdom lingering from our ancient hunter-gatherer roots is the quality of resilience. Our ancestors understood that it was necessary for their survival to be able to change course and adapt accordingly. Therefore, it may be that resilience is in our DNA and can be tuned into as well as cultivated.

In addition to the suggestions offered by Siebert above, I would like to add my own. First, I adamantly believe that just as we must prepare ourselves physically for collapse by eating healthy foods and getting in shape, we must also cultivate emotional depth and discernment. In my opinion, this does not mean "resolving all of our issues". At this writing, we are witnessing the collapse of a healthcare system in the United States that is now being held together by a few frayed threads. In a post-industrial world there will be no formal healthcare, nor will there be psychotherapy as we know it today. Anything we can do now to attend to our physical and emotional wellbeing—any tools we can bring with us into collapse to enhance that wellbeing are absolutely crucial.

Some of the tools we might consider are first of all, personal journaling as a means of becoming still and present each day to our experience. It is an efficient and illuminating tool for attending to the inner world.

Many individuals have also discovered the rewards of joining a Non-Violent Communication

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group as a means of deepening their sense of community as well as their personal emotional well being. For those involved with Transition Towns, Non-Violent Communication groups are natural, and perhaps inevitable, corridors of connection among citizens of a particular place.

Similarly, Heart Circles [<http://carolynbaker.net/site/content/view/1209/1/#_edn8>](http://carolynbaker.net/site/content/view/1209/1/#_edn8) as developed by founder, Tej Steiner, offer deeply rewarding venues for connecting with oneself, one's community, and the earth. Heart Circles are not therapy process groups and should not be conducted as such, but rather offer opportunities within families, businesses, and local communities to support awakening, resilience, and social change.

Very important for our emotional wellbeing is our capacity to hold alongside current dark realities, a vision of how we would like to structure our lives and communities in a post-carbon world, even if our vision never comes to fruition. Peter Senge

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scientist and organizational development wizard, teaches the urgency of holding our vision alongside an accurate picture of current reality for the purpose of generating the creative tension necessary for arriving at new and perhaps previously unimagined options. Just as it is perilous to hold only an optimistic vision of the future without considering the dire implications of collapse, it does not serve us or our fellow humans to focus on calamity to the exclusion of possibility. Both are essential nutrients in harvesting the innovation and resourcefulness required to meet the exigencies of the Long Emergency and transform the paradigm that brought us to the present predicament.

As we cultivate head awareness through information, and cultivate hand awareness through re-skilling, the challenges of collapse require that we also cultivate the heart awareness that

nurtures resilience for the daunting transitions ahead. "Great Nature has another thing to do to you and me", says Roethke, and by fine-tuning our resilience, we may "learn by going where go."

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