

Sermon: The Ordinary Magic of Resilience  
Casey Keene, July 9, 2017

Johnny grew up in Baltimore where he watched his mother do her best to navigate her marriage to his father - a man who lied, cheated, and hurt her. His addiction and his lies put their family into financial crisis. As a teenager, he stood up to his father who retaliated with gunfire - bullets intended for his own son.

Ruby and her four siblings grew up in Nevada, all of them working together to push their dresser in front of their bedroom door to barricade themselves inside and away from their father's violence. They would all get in bed together, listening as he hurt their mother - assuring each other that they would be okay if they just stayed together.

Olga grew up in Minnesota where she and her mother survived her father's abuse. He trained her brothers to abuse her as well. There was no safe place. Dissociation allowed her to separate from the pain, fragmenting these experiences into distinct personalities.

William was 10 years old, living in the DC area, when he witnessed the murders of his mother and 12-year-old brother at the hands of his mom's ex-boyfriend in their family living room. The killer took his own life that day, but not before making William beg for his own life.

Most of our society's children are exposed to violence in their daily lives, either directly or indirectly.

Over half experienced violence in the past year, and lifetime rates are 1/3 to 1/2 higher than that.

But Casey, you're thinking, I thought you were going to talk about resilience! This is simply awful. *This* doesn't feel good.

But this is what I want you to understand: Trauma is a part of life. It is a common human experience - one that is largely overlooked when we talk about our lives, or when we attempt to understand and explain human behavior.

We overlook it because our cultural norms set us up to do so. In our culture, nobody wants to be a victim. Even for those who are, we resist the term. We search for alternate ways to label our experiences, or reject them altogether. But victimhood has nothing to do with the victim - that was not a choice they made. You don't get to choose. In life, there are things that happen *to* you that help shape who you are. Among them is trauma. And trauma is self-defined and self-identified. It's a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that has a lasting effect on a person's life. What is trauma for one may not be for another. Every one of us knows what those hurts are - the ones that stay with us even today. We carry them.

And here's where the magic comes in. We grow from this trauma, we learn from it, we use

these experiences to inform our choices going forward. We come to understand how these experiences have helped to shape the way in which we see the world. We learn that our responses and reactions to these traumas are, in fact, *normal* reactions to *abnormal* circumstances. There isn't something wrong with us – we have simply adapted.

Our culture's way of understanding trauma is informed by a deficit model – one that dwells on negative outcomes of adverse experiences – it focuses on what we've lost, what's been damaged, impairments and symptoms and disorders. We have been taught to seek the cycles of violence and abuse – and to think that someone with a history of childhood trauma will go on to repeat it. That they are somehow doomed. And our reactions to these stories serve to perpetuate this cycle, trapping people with our expectations of their future. And these low expectations lead us to be shocked when a person emerges resilient - when they break free and follow a different path.

But resilience isn't shocking. It's not even something that some people have and others don't. It's not a trait. Resilience is an innate ability for adaptation that lives inside every single one of us. We are built this way to survive the trauma and hardship that will inevitably come our way in life. We all have the capacity to sustain our own well being in the face of adversity. It's a human capacity that we can nurture and develop our whole lives long.

Here is another statistic for you: 1/2 to 1/3 of children exposed to trauma go on to achieve successful and well adjusted lives.

Resilience is ordinary. Imagine that!

The deficit model that we've historically used to understand adverse childhood experiences is incomplete. In fact, these experiences allow a person to develop specialized skills for adaptation. It's called post-traumatic growth.

As Rumi said, "The wound is the place where the Light enters you." Each of the stories I shared earlier holds evidence of this principle.

Johnny learned to be brave.

Ruby learned the power of family bonds.

Olga learned the protective capacity of her brain.

William learned his own strength.

These are the stories of my colleagues - all who serve together with me on the Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence Leadership Forum, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. The Forum is comprised of advocates in the movement to end gender-based violence who identify as having experienced domestic violence in childhood. It was

established to amplify the voices and experiences of children to enhance our work to end domestic violence.

Today, Johnny teaches criminal justice at Coppin State University after retiring from the Vera Institute of Justice.

Ruby is the director of the National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities.

Olga is an attorney, speaker, author and Director of Public Policy at Casa de Esperanza.

And William of [The William Kellibrew Foundation](#) is a global advocate for human, civil, children's and victims' rights.

These amazing advocates have accomplished great things in their careers, but what makes their work so powerful is the fact that they bring their whole selves to it. They have incorporated their experiences of trauma - bringing all of the strengths and assets from those experiences to their work.

This is not to say that each of their lives follows a smooth and upward linear path, because it does not. I've never believed in fairy tales, and I'm not telling you one now. Our lives are ever evolving narratives, and so is the pathway to resilience, and the equally important parallel process of *healing*. As we encounter new traumas and challenges, our resilience capacity ebbs and flows.

Resilience is a process in that there is no end – there is no point at which a person can declare, "I'm done! I've achieved resilience!" There is no completion certificate.

But there are things we can practice that will help us on the path. By building our own capacity for resilience, we can help to foster those adaptive skills in others. There is power in modeling this important process.

**One:** Name your experience. This is the first step in pushing back against the stigma associated with victimization.

**Two:** Tell your story. You don't have to tell it from the pulpit. You can tell it to your journal, you can express it in painting, you can confide in a friend.

**Three:** Practice mindfulness. Be aware of yourself, what you're feeling internally, and the beauty around you at any given moment.

**Four:** Ground yourself in your body. Delight in your own capacity for strength, endurance, and flexibility. Dance, play, feel your own unique presence in the world.

**Five:** Seek support. Resilience is not a solo journey. In fact, loving supportive relationships are

the number one most important factor in building your resilience capacity.

According to one of my favorite articles on resilience from Psychology Today, "The healing process isn't about becoming who you might have been had you not experienced trauma. It's about integrating the wisdom you have gained from this experience into your life."

It is important to understand that as human beings we have the power to draw from all of our life experiences. We can realize the value these experiences add to our lives, and we can be bold in bringing our whole selves to the table. Because the table is expansive and welcoming and has the capacity to hold everything we bring. Everyone sitting at it is richer for that.

Remember that, yes, trauma is a common experience. But we are human as a result of it, not in spite of it.

Resilience is the super power you never knew you always had. It may be ordinary, but it's still magic.