I have been amazed these recent weeks by stories of people helping people. I’ve been lifted by the courage of heroic souls who wouldn’t ever think of themselves in that way. And I’ve been inspired by the strength of ordinary people as the ferocity of storms reminds us again just how small we are in the face of nature’s power.

And how large we can be, too! Like the guy who kept flying his small plane into Houston loaded with toys, blankets and diapers for children. Or the human chain that formed as arms and hands interlocked to save a man caught up in a riptide. Or the airline that saved the lives of thousands of pets that would have otherwise drowned in the surges of Irma.

All manner of differences set aside, person to person, we have seen in real-time how powerful and compassionate the human spirit can be. My favorite theologian, Mr. Rogers, was right: “In the midst of whatever horrible things happen always look for the helpers.” They are the ones who show us something about God.

But that’s not what I want to talk about today. It only gets me going. No, instead I want us to turn our hearts and minds around the amazing human capacity for resilience.

So let’s start with a definition. Psychology Today tells us “resilience is the ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes.”

It’s been very much before us these present days and I can’t help but wonder: where does it come from? What enables people to find strength in the midst of tragedy? Why does resilience seem more natural to some than to others? Is it a learned response to life? Is it earned through experience? Is it simply given?

I read a current bestseller this summer called “Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy” in which I found a few answers to such questions.

Curiously, psychologist Martin Seligman prefers a flip-side approach in his practice as he observes that many people unwittingly sabotage themselves and push their capacity for resilience away. In particular, he warns any and all of us to beware the three p’s: 1) personalization – that’s the tendency to interpret what-so-ever hardship has come to pass personally; 2) pervasiveness – that’s the belief that it will affect and overwhelm all areas of our life; and 3) permanence – that’s the fear that we will never get over what has happened.

I find these really helpful. And in wondering about resilience it’s true. Recognizing that negative events aren’t personal, pervasive or permanent makes any of us better able to cope, less prone to being victims, empowered to bounce back, and to help others to do the same.
A second insight I found in Option B is about the power of faith. Whatever your faith tradition, however thin or thick it may feel to you, lean into it. Please note this is not about religion or structures or rules for living. It’s about the deeper human need to stay connected to the Source and Destiny of life.

The simple, replicable truth is that turning to God gives people a sense of being enveloped in loving arms that are eternal and ultimately strong. Over and over again those arms, so much larger than our own, become the buoy across the circumference of struggle and storm.

Paul’s words come back to me, and he knew storm and struggle in ways we can’t even begin to imagine. “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed but not driven to despair. Persecuted but not forsaken. Struck down but not destroyed. So we do not lose heart.”

Anna was a parishioner of Peter, a colleague I know only by his writings. He tells of caring for Anna in her last weeks and days. “Sometimes when I visited she would take my hand and start to pray; at other times I would take the lead. Even though her voice and body were growing weaker her eyes retained their glow and her mind its spark. ‘Pastor,’ she said to me one day, ‘I don’t see myself as getting any better. So how about we skip the talk about healing today? I need to push deeper. I just want to pray for the Lord not to leave me. That’s all I need now – the close company of God.”

And I believe that in all times and places, all circumstances of challenge and loss, of fear or uncertainty the faith factor, if you will, the desire for the close company of God feeds the wells of recovery and resilience.

Then this. The fruits of resilience emerge at their best more frequently when we reach out to others, when we don’t go it alone, when we seek the strength and company of others and when we rely on the resource of community. Or, when we ourselves become as a source of community and connection to others in need.

Sometimes we hold back, and others, too – and it is almost certain to be to our detriment. But crisis has a way of calling us together and being a hand and taking a hand.

“Once somewhere out in Northern Minnesota a five year-old child wandered off into the wheat field of his parent’s farm. His mother quickly called to his father as they both began to search and call out his name – with increasing worry and fear. The farmhands quickly commandeered the help of any and all that they could enlist into the search. They began to shout out – all of them, and hunted in every direction. More people joined the increasingly frantic search. Finally one person said, ‘we seem to be going off in all directions. Why don’t we join hands and spread out like a human comb through every inch of the field.’ So they did. And what a good thing. What a saving move. Because they soon after found the boy unconscious, breathing very shallow, but just in the nick of time. They were able to revive him. It all ended happily.

As they all gathered back at the farmhouse one person said ‘that was way too close a call. We should have joined hands sooner.’
I want to remember these things. Because my life will face adversity now and again and so will yours. Of that we can all be certain. And learning to be resilient is a spiritual practice we can all engage come whatever may.

The three p’s to avoid: taking whatever has happened personally; believing that it will pervade all the rest of our lives; and being convinced that the loss and pain are permanent. When we think in these ways we push our capacity for resilience away.

But turning the wells of faith - even in faith’s struggle to understand; and not going it alone by reaching out sooner rather than later. When we do think and pray and act in these ways we pull our capacity for resilience closer.

Wherever this can find a home in our hearts today is a very good thing. In the name of the One whose resilience holds us, each and every one. Amen.

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