

## ***Bouncebackability***

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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### ***Reflection on Resilience*** by Ashley Pope

I've always been amazed at the way our kids bounce back. Whether it be from arguments, injuries or disappointment. As adults this can affect us for hours, days, weeks or even years. A young child in our nursery can fight with a friend over a toy and in the heat of the moment even say things like "You can't come to my birthday," or even worse..."you're not my best friend". They are even amazing at naming the issue by saying it out loud " I don't like that!"

But not 5 minutes later they can come to a compromise and be playing together again. Our teens have had some pretty in-depth political and ethical discussions around our Twilight zone curriculum and some days they disagree pretty firmly and get into some good back and forth, some even have to walk out for a minute to gather themselves to continue, but when we see each other the next week, it's like it never happened.

I've worked with children for about 20 years and young children just have this ability to let things slide off of them and move forward with the day. They can fall and scrape a knee but the promise of a story time and a snack when they go home can dry up the tears in an instant and a smile comes over their face. An argument with a friend is just that and nothing more. It doesn't get personal. I think we can all take note of how they just don't let it bother them after a while and look forward to the better things of the day.

### ***Excerpt from Good Thing I Bounce©*** by Rev. Lynn Ungar

You know those little, colorful, ultra-bouncy Super Balls? That's what comes to mind when I think of the word "resilience." People and other beings who are resilient bounce back when they get dropped.

It turns out that how tough you are is not a measure of how well you bounce back. An iron ball is harder and stronger than a ball of synthetic rubber. But if you drop it, it just sits there in the little hole that it dug in the floor. Life would be easier if we had hearts of iron, if we were pure strength and nothing hurt us. But we would not be resilient, we would be sociopaths. Not a thing I recommend.

Being flexible is closer to being resilient, but it isn't quite the same thing. Water would be the ultimate in flexibility. It doesn't just go with the flow; flow is its very nature. If you pour out a bucket of water, it doesn't hold together. It flows off, or evaporates. There's no *there* there.

So what makes a rubber ball so resilient? What can we learn from whatever it is that makes balls bounce back?

Well, the first thing that makes a ball bounce is that fact that it lets itself be affected by its environment. When the ball hits the floor it gets pushed in. You can actually see this taking place with an inflatable

bouncy ball—Super Balls are much too quick to watch it happen. But unlike the iron ball, which holds to its shape no matter what, the rubber ball bends where it is pushed.

Even setting aside the cataclysms of politics and environmental devastation, there are plenty of times when it feels like we are falling, or have bottomed out. When a friendship ends; when we don't succeed at something that matters to us; when someone we love dies; when we lose a job or a marriage or a physical ability; when someone we trusted betrays us. The list of ways that we can feel like life has dropped us can go on and on.

And when that happens, the first important piece of bouncing back is to bend to the circumstances. It doesn't help to pretend that everything is fine. (*"No, really just fine."*) The things that hurt us hurt us, and we need to be honest about that. The things that hurt us also change us. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Often the times when we have learned and grown the most have been times when we've felt dropped—when something changed in a way that was deeply painful and disorienting.

Because what happens to a rubber ball after it bends to the impact of the floor is that it pushes back. If you drop a bag of sand, it will bend to take on the shape of the floor as it hits. But then it just sits there. Resilience, bouncing back, is about the combination of bending to what happens to you and then pushing back. We name what hurts us, feel the hurt, but then we respond.

**Excerpt from *Good Thing I Bounce*© by Rev. Lynn Ungar**

We name what hurts us, feel the hurt, but then we respond. And we don't just name the things that hurt us personally, we recognize the broader ways in which groups of people—and the whole non-human world—are pretty much getting shoved out of the airplane. And we push back.

Which I know is easier said than done. The assaults are so many and so grave and so ongoing that it feels completely overwhelming to even begin to respond to them all.

So don't. Don't respond to them all. Choose one. Or choose one per day or one per week. Give up making things right, and try to do something to make the world better. One way to deal with overwhelm is to make a plan, and declare that that plan is enough. Monday I will write to the newspaper OpEd page. Wednesday I will call a senator. Maybe the plan is smaller. Monday I will talk with my kids about why voting matters. Wednesday I'll bring up my neighbor's garbage cans. Friday I will eat a vegan meal. Saturday I will call my aunt.

Pushing back, bouncing back, doesn't happen in all directions at once, and it doesn't imply anything about the outcome. Bouncing is about your own direction, your own momentum. Depression is a state of stillness, of being stuck. Resilience is a state of movement, and it is an affirmation of our power to choose.

Of course, we don't get to choose everything. Circumstances lock us in in a variety of ways. But we always have the opportunity to choose something, and that act of choosing in and of itself is our resilience.

Think you are completely stuck? That you have no choices? Let me tell you a story. For many years I served as one of the ministers of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, a UU church that exists primarily online. But they have more than 1000 members who actually can't access the online services because they are incarcerated. One of the services that the CLF provides for incarcerated members is correspondence classes. A member, I'll call him Dwayne, was enrolled in a class called Full-Spectrum Joyfulness, taught by my friend Rev. Amanda Aikman, that uses the colors of the rainbow as a kind of mnemonic for ways to find joy. Well, taking a class in Joy when you're incarcerated is a pretty resilient thing to do, but Dwayne came up short in the class session that talked about nature as a source of joy.

You see, Dwayne had no access to nature. He was in solitary confinement. He didn't even have a window that he could look out of into the natural world. But it turned out that there were some ants in Dwayne's cell, and he was able to find joy in observing them, following their interactions and their habits, connecting himself with loving attention to this ever so tiny bit of nature.

That's resilience. And it turns out that those who have the least have the most to teach us about resilient ways of living. As I've watched the plunge right of the Supreme Court and worried about the ways that the legal system has been twisted to serve power rather than truth, I've reminded myself of all the folks through the centuries who have not been able to count on justice from the legal system, who have known going in that they are convicted more by the color of their skin than the content of their character—or even the reality of their actions.

Of course, knowing that injustice has always been there doesn't make it any more right, or any easier to bear. But it reminds me that people through the ages have managed to make their way, pushing back where they could, stepping aside where they had to, making a way out of no way. There are role models, and the people who have the most to teach us about resilience are the folks who have had the most practice.

And what I have learned from these role models is consistent with my super ball theory. You see, what allows a rubber ball to push back is that it remembers its true shape. And going back to its true shape is what pushes it back up into the air. Resilience is about being able to push back against circumstances because you remember who you really are.

### ***Reflection on Resilience*** by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

We build resilience by using all our resources, which include relying on other people. A couple of weeks ago, I had the opportunity to go to Minneapolis to participate in A Call to Minneapolis: faith leaders answering history in a time of peril and possibility. This gathering was an initial act of collective responsibility - rooted in relationship, spiritual grounding and commitment to communities facing heightened harm and scrutiny in this moment. I want to show you a photo I couldn't find when I preached upon my return - here is the sanctuary full of clergy who arrived in Minneapolis to support the citizens protecting their neighbors from the ICE invasion. There were 650 of us who arrived, and we carried our congregations and colleagues with us as we marched that Friday. I reached out to the ministers in this congregation to let them know I was doing this, and they asked how they could help. It was then that Lynn Ungar, a retired UU minister, poet and dog trainer, offered me her sermon, *Good Thing I Bounce*. She had heard me announce that at the end of the 30 days of love, this morning, Ashley

and I would be holding an all ages services on Bouncebackability and she had this sermon already prepared about bouncing back and resilience!

Because I am resilient, I accepted her generous offer with gratitude. Having this service largely planned made it possible for me to leave with little notice and participate as I did in Minneapolis. The drawdown of ICE in Minnesota has begun, though we know this story is not over. Nevertheless, we move forward when things get hard. Here is the final segment of Lynn's sermon, *Good Thing I Bounce*.

**Excerpt from *Good Thing I Bounce*© by Rev. Lynn Ungar**

There are lots of things that can help us remember who we are. We can turn for support to the people who know and love us, who do not forget who we are, who can sing our songs back to us when we need reminding.

We can make common cause with people who do not know us, but who care about what we care about. We can be with those who remind us that we are stronger together, that a sufficient number of snowflakes is a blizzard.

We can attend to the stories of other people who've made it through—our friends, our ancestors, our heroes. But also the complete strangers who are out there living lives of quiet courage. If you want to get really specific about this, I recommend the podcast *The Moth*, which is simply people telling their own stories. People of wildly different ages, races, ethnicities and everything else telling stories that are hilarious or heartbreaking or sometimes both. It turns out that when you listen to someone's story you walk in their shoes, see the world from their perspective. It expands your heart. It also expands your sense of the possible, the breadth of who you are.

We can remember who we are through spiritual practice--through meditation or prayer that helps us to return to center. But spiritual practice can be the ongoing and determined commitment to any practice that we truly love, whether it be running, singing, writing, sports, gardening, riding a bike, dancing, etc., etc. Building resilience is like building muscle. It takes time and effort. It can be achieved by sustained attention to the source of our joy.

And we can build that muscle of returning to our true shape by identifying our core values, the principles that are foundational to who we are, and then testing our actions against those values. Which is really what the practice of Unitarian Universalism is all about. Those core values don't have to be the same for each of us, but together we explore and test and question and come around to an understanding of what at heart defines who are and who we want to be. For me, today, I would say those values are integrity, kinship and creativity. You might well pick a different three, but I'd challenge you to know what your core values are, to say them aloud, or write them down, and keep them as a touchstone to guide you in the moments of falling.

We may not spring back to our true shape as quickly as a Super Ball, but the better we know who we are, and the more we honor what most matters to us, the faster we will be able to reclaim that shape. So even if everything is going smoothly in your life, it's worth paying close attention to what shapes and heals and holds you.

Here's one more important fact about a Super Ball. It's really hard to predict just which way it is going to bounce. Resilience, pushing back into your true shape, doesn't necessarily mean heading right back where you were before you got dropped. Bouncing back most often means heading up in a new direction—either just a shade off from where you were before or to a completely different part of the room. That's what's really exciting about resilience. It allows us to hold on to our true self while adapting to a world that is different, bouncing off in a new direction ourselves. In his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" Wendell Berry writes:

As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.

Lose the predictable. Maybe, just possibly, even lose your head. Choose your own direction. Practice resurrection. Resilient people, resilient communities, even resilient ecologies function that way. They accept changing circumstances and push back against them by both holding to what is most essential and by being prepared to change and adapt in ways that allow for creativity and possibility and new life.

But here's where the Super Ball analogy breaks down. Super Balls are safe to use in the house because they're soft enough not to break things. They don't change their environment. But resilient people and resilient communities not only change themselves, they can also find ways to change what is around them, pushing back in ways that shape the environment to be healthier or kinder or more compassionate for everyone.

I will confess this about myself. I used to be an optimistic person, someone with a generally cheerful view of the goodness of human nature. I regret to say that lately I've come to see that my optimism is largely unjustified, and that people operate far more from a place of fear than of rationality, and are far easier to manipulate by the greedy and power-hungry than I had believed. Optimism is pretty hard to justify these days.

And so instead of optimism I am going with hope. Not a conviction that everything is going to turn out for the best, but a conviction that people are resilient, systems are resilient, nature is resilient. Some years ago, at a low point in my life when I was going through a devastatingly painful episode..., I chose a motto for myself: Things Will Happen. Now, you may not find that helpful, but it is most certainly true. Things will happen. Wonderful things, terrible things, they're all going to happen. Might as well accept it. But whatever is happening in the moment, there will be ways to choose joy, choose love, choose connection. Whatever is happening around us, we have the capacity to be in it together, to support one another, to dream and to work and to play and to push back and to push on toward the world we dream of.

Good thing we bounce.