



SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Resilience, Hope and Forgiveness

By Marjolijn de Jager

Sunday, July 21, 2019 10 AM

So what about resilience?

Looking back at eight decades of living, I've been wondering about its meaning, what got me from there to here, and realized that one of my guiding forces has been resilience. What does that involve, of what does it consist? The many definitions I found vary but overlap. My personal favorite, short and sweet, comes from the neuro-scientist Richard Davidson who, when interviewed recently by Krista Tippett in *On Being*, defined it as follows: "Resilience is the rapidity with which one recovers from adversity," and, I would add, the extent to which one recovers.

Is it learned, the way we learn to read and write, do we draw upon it intuitively when it is—sometimes desperately—needed, is it genetic? Many questions, but today I'd just like to explore how it has helped me rebound from the low points in my life.

First some family background:

- I am from the Netherlands, which for 350 years (1602-1949) colonized what is today Indonesia under the name of the Dutch-East-Indies. North of Australia, south of Malaysia and the Philippines, it is with its 17 thousand islands the world's largest island country. The Dutch called it the *De Gordel van Smaragd, the Emerald Belt*, because of its endless green rice paddies, dense jungles, cooler mountain regions where the Dutch had tea plantations or vacation homes.
- For better or worse, on both sides of my family I come from 5 or 6 generations of colonizers. One grandfather was *Resident*—roughly equivalent to a state governor here—of the province of Atjeh on Sumatra, which is about the size of Texas; my

other grandfather was employed his entire life by the Dutch-East-Indies railways on the island of Java. As a young, just out of college engineer, my father worked on Borneo for Royal Dutch oil, better known as Shell Oil. I was born on Borneo in 1936, in an oilfield where a handful of houses and a two-bed hospital stood on poles—in part to protect us from snakes and other unwelcome intruders—far enough inland that my birth wasn't registered in Samarinda, a city on the east coast, until I was already six weeks old.

- In 1939, my father was sent to the USA for a year. Although my mother had left him when I was one year old, they were not yet divorced; for a variety of reasons he was trying to convince her to stay in the marriage. Knowing she was eager to see America, he had her follow him to California with me, now barely 4. A few months later she read the headlines in the paper that was shoved under the hotel room door, saw that the Germans had bombed Rotterdam and invaded the Netherlands. Thus, we could not go there; my father was drafted into the Dutch-East-Indies air force, while my mother and I were not allowed to remain in America. My father was sure we'd be safe back in the Indies, so having no other choice we returned there, now to Java.
- Having overrun China (early 1930's) and Indo-China in 1940, the Japanese invaded the Dutch-East-Indies in March of 1942. Leaving the local population alone they almost immediately incarcerated the Dutch as Prisoners of War, together with the few British and Australians who were also living there.
- My father was shot down over the Java Sea, but the Japanese fished him out and imprisoned him in a camp in Japan. We didn't hear from him again until late 1945.
- More than 110,000 civilian prisoners like ourselves were locked up, plus another 37,000 soldiers and militia. The men and all boys over the age of 10 were sent to men's camps, in former convents, schools, army barracks; women and children were transported to blocks of residential neighborhoods, but now one family to a room, a mother and her children, no matter how many. This is what happened to my mother and me. I was 5 ½. I remember we were forced to move into the garage of the small house we'd occupied before the war, while four other women moved

in with their kids. The Japanese built barbed wire and bamboo fences around the equivalent of about 5 square city blocks. At first one could still leave the camp to go to the market or visit friends and family. But after a few months the gates were locked and all contact with the outside world was gone. For 3 ½ years no mail, no newspapers, no radio, nothing. For 3 ½ years we didn't know whether my grandmother in Amsterdam was alive or not, whether Europe was still at war or not. Nothing but a daily life of hunger, vermin, diseases, heat, and not knowing if or when it would end.

- Twice a year the Japanese would round up those boys who had reached their 10th birthday and haul them off. I clearly remember that semi-annual procession of mothers, some weeping, others stoic as they accompanied their small sons to the gate, watched them being loaded onto trucks, no idea where they were being taken or if they would ever see them again.
- Twice we were transported to other camps, taking only what we could carry, except for the mattress you slept on, which the Japanese were kind enough to move. These camps consisted of long rectangular bamboo-and-rattan barracks, with planks like shelves along the sides serving as beds: 5000 women and children, 20 inches per child, 30 per adult. All of it under increasingly worse conditions: rats in the rafters looking down on us; a handful of rice per person per meal, sometimes just duck feed or unchewable, indigestible waterlily stems posing as a vegetable; killing flies with the palm of your hand because a pile of 100 dead flies would be awarded with one vitamin-filled hot chili pepper; roll call three times a day in an open field as we bowed Japanese style: *yotskay*, *kiray*, *naoray* all in a strict, ritual manner. Bowing not low enough or straightening up too quickly meant beatings or worse. One form of punishment, head being shaved with a shard of glass, was so common that the women would simply wrap a scarf around their bloodied scalp and carry on. Huge barrels of water stood in a separate vast barracks for bathing, using a small cup to rinse with and brushing our teeth with ash. Education was strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, my mother refused to have her child be illiterate and, although not an educator, took it upon herself to teach

me and a few other children to read and write with a stick in the sand while her closest friend stood guard. To her credit, all but one of us miraculously made it into 4th grade after the war.

In the first camp, our garage had a footpath leading to an outer street with a view of the barbed wire fence. I don't remember what I 'd done wrong, though I know little 6-year old girls can be quite exasperating, even infuriating, at times. Whatever the reason, my mother had enough of me. She packed a wicker basket with some clothes and sent me on my way, saying I'd better not come back as she wouldn't have anything further to do with me. When I said tearfully I'd go to Auntie Ans at the other side of the camp, she said: "She won't take you; who would ever want you?" I sat on a huge rock in the street outside for the rest of the day and cried and cried and cried. Toward evening my mother came out, told me I had one last chance, put the basket by the foot end of the bed. There it stayed. A reminder. And I heeded it. For the next 12 years or so. I became what Simone de Beauvoir in the first volume of her autobiography called *a Dutiful Daughter*. Dutiful, indeed. Just coping can be a form of resilience, too. As an adolescent in Amsterdam, now the semi-permanent housekeeper of my mother and stepfather, and the nanny of my baby half-sisters, I never rebelled, despite the encouragement of my two close friends (still my dearest friends to this day). It was my way of self-discovery, of pulling through, moving on, without simultaneously having to do battle with them. Just do what you're told, don't give them any grief. Being awarded a 1-year scholarship to a Missouri college when I graduated from my Amsterdam HS was a beacon of light: I was going to get away from them. At last!

Most of my life I've believed it was this single traumatic experience at age 6 that awakened what I later knew was my resilience. But I realize now—thanks to an insight from David during our discussion about today—that the so intensely compacted, immediate group environment of the camps must have played perhaps an even greater role.

Nobody had family around. Instead, the collective of 5000 women and children became one huge extended family, trudging through each day doing hard labor for the Japanese. Besides trying to survive physically and—dutifully! —obeying the Japanese orders, what kept these women going? Resilience has many components, and as a child I was not consciously aware of being surrounded by it 24 hours a day. One of its elements is humor: I do remember women writing menus: rice for breakfast, rice for lunch, rice for dinner; women telling pre-war stories or jokes, teaching the children nursery rhymes; women laughing, women singing tunes as they hung their ragged laundry on a line under the killer sun—a favorite was “Don’t Fence Me In”—, women exchanging recipes for when it would be over, for when peace would return.

That ‘when peace will return’ embodied *hope*, another vital element of resilience. Dr. Panter-Brick writes the following:

[...] a few words on a *cultural* perspective on resilience. Let me give you an example. I conducted ... face-to-face interviews with over a thousand families, both youth and adults, in Afghanistan. If you had to boil down “resilience” to just one single word ... that word is “hope.” [...] I found that Afghan families believe that the future matters much more than the past in determining their present well-being: being able to get up each day and go harness resources toward securing a better future matters more than the turmoil and traumas of the past.

Unaware of the rigorous intensity of our camp environment—after the first year or so, we children didn’t really understand what our mothers were talking about when they mentioned “before the war”: we didn’t remember—it seems clear now that I grew up virtually enveloped by a cloak of fierce resilience, that people could make it through each day while looking forward with hope in their hearts. It must have had an enduring impact on many of us children. It certainly helped shape me, as I experienced the characteristics of resilient people writ large.

Neil Farber writes: “While there is a genetic component to resilience, it is also a trait and skill set that can be learned and cultivated.”

I see this genetic aspect in our family, in my maternal grandmother above all, who was my model and to this day feeds my soul. And, parenthetically, if there is such a thing as a *national* characteristic, resilience is certainly a Dutch trait, too. For 2000 years the Dutch have been reclaiming land from the sea in a country where 1/3 lies below sea level, involved in a constant struggle to literally keep their heads above water. Now that’s resilience! After recovering from the catastrophic 1953 flood in the south-west of the country, they built the Delta Works to keep the North Sea out and put a stop to the endlessly recurrent disasters. Sadly, the climate change crisis is now posing a very real new threat.

Back to the element of hope. Hope is not expectation. Expectations give rise to disappointment. I’ve rarely had any *expectations* in my life, other than of myself perhaps. For instance, when I entered graduate school, I didn’t hope but I *expected* to come out with degrees, but that is the extent of it. However, I’ve always been hopeful, finding the spark of light that is so often rooted in the support system I’d discover and then nurture, thus brightening the path for the next step.

In his book *The Resiliency Advantage*, Al Siebert writes that: “It can be tough to reach out when we are going through difficult times -- even if we crave connection. [...] Like all of the physical and mental resilience factors, this is a habit that we can cultivate; like building muscle, it gets stronger the more we do it. [...] Reaching out to a single friend or family member on a regular basis to touch on how things are going is sufficient. [...] belief in the goodness of humankind and having hope.”

Concerning the element of hope, there is a lovely interview with Mary Oliver by Lauren Krauze, which she described not long after Oliver’s death. She had asked the poet: “What content do you choose to leave out of your work?”

“Well,” Oliver said softly, “a lot of poetry these days is sardonic and full of sarcasm. I leave that stuff out.” [...] “Yes,” she said, shrugging. “I guess I just prefer hope.”

BREAK FOR MUSIC

Finally, I believe that *forgiveness*, too, is a crucial part of resilience. We can't move forward when resentment, grudges, or worse yet, hate are holding us back. And forgiveness must, I believe, be preceded and then accompanied by compassion. When there is compassion, we begin to understand why the other party operated the way it did.

Let me offer one example, again from WWII. A few weeks ago, serendipitously, I came upon a book just published in the Netherlands. Its title is: *The Man who Survived Nagasaki – the incredible story of the soldier Dick Büchel van Steenbergen*. Born in 1920, he served in the Dutch East-Indies air force, as did my father. Like my father he, too, was shot down and taken to a concentration camp in Japan where he was forced to do hard labor at a Mitsubishi shipyard in Nagasaki. On August 9th, 1945, Dick van Steenbergen sees the atom bomb, attached to parachutes, dropping down. He runs for his life and miraculously survives. Last month when, having just turned 99, he was interviewed and asked whether he hated the Japanese as surely he must; he said no, he did not; very few soldiers, he said, *want* to fight in a war; and the Japanese were no exception, like the Allies they only did what in wartime they had to do; hate is toxic, he continued, and keeps you from moving on with your life. In his YouTube interview he is both serious and serene, with a wise and gentle smile. Although one might expect him to be, this was not a bitter man.

Coming full circle then, once I began to figure out what experiences my mother had lived as a child: a very shy girl, home-schooled by my grandmother in Atjeh with her two brothers; very few, if any, other peers around; sent *at age 12* to an unknown foster family in the ‘motherland’, a country completely foreign to her, never to live with her parents again; married at 19, a mother at 20 – undoubtedly unplanned –; then from a life of relative comfort to 3 ½ years as a POW of the Japanese. It couldn't have been easy and I, as her sole companion, was also the one target on which to let out her fears and

frustration. Granted, she was 26 while I was only 6, but in trying to put myself in her shoes compassion began to blossom, which in turn helped me grow stronger.

Let me conclude with these words of Desmond Tutu: 'In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again.'

May each of us find the strength to heal the broken parts and become whole again.

* * *

CLOSING WORDS—a poem by Miller Williams that, thanks to the Rev. Frank Hall, many here know well:

COMPASSION

Have compassion for everyone you meet,
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.