Pathways to spiritual resiliency

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Alexandria, MN          September 18, 2014
What happens as life brings physical changes—either gradual
Or sudden
What do we see when we look at a seriously ill person?
Weakness or strength?
Foolishness or wisdom?
Closed doors or possibilities for tomorrow?

Don't stare at the closed door too long... you'll miss the window opening!
Diversity, diversity, diversity
Some people obviously cope better than others with physical challenges and losses. Why?
Some periods of life are simply more difficult than others.
Some people have better support systems and financial resources
Cultural and family “scripts” for growing old and facing one’s mortality vary greatly.
Our cognitions and perspectives vary
And the ways we talk to our selves are very different.
Some of us are better at SOC than others. Selectivity is done unconsciously (who would you want to be with if the world were about to end?)
Optimization means finding growth-oriented goals, rather than focusing on losses.
Compensation means giving up impossible dreams and substituting with new, attainable goals

• [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svzPm8lT36o#action=share](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svzPm8lT36o#action=share)
Personality traits are different, learned and given.

Big Five Personality Traits:
- Open
- Extraverted
- Agreeable
- Conscientious
- Stable
In the end, the mystery of human diversity is beyond scientific understanding.
Are those of us who give care sometimes part of the problem?

- Do we have “problem saturated” approaches to care?
- Do we ask questions that are less helpful?
- Do we see problems rather than people?
- Do we fail to care for our own selves?
- Do we neglect our own spiritual pathways to strength and faith?
Some of us are trained, or inclined, to look for pathology.
Yet we are often surprised by the people we meet, by their strength and joy.
My interest: Not labels, but how well people cope, over time?
Resiliency: The Bounce-Back Factor
- Capacity to endure stress
- Not mere coping, not mere survival
- Tendency to do well over the long term
Resiliency is best understood through metaphors.
Resiliency as recovery
Resiliency as Resistance
Resiliency as Reconfiguration
What does resiliency have to do with end of life issues?

artist: Domenico Ghirlandaio
Our challenges multiply—and intensify—after our own or a loved one’s serious diagnosis.

- Increased vulnerability
- Chronic physical problems
- Change, change, change
- Role losses
- Financial problems
- Medical management
- Complicated family issues
Overall, stress is at an all-time high for many people and their caregivers.
In a new landscape, hope itself needs to be re-defined.
Many ill persons, especially older adults, use religious language to talk about their source of hope.
Clearly, without hope we cannot be strong. But what is strength now?
Spiritual Resiliency: One way to talk about this hard-won strength.

• Includes the “bounce back” aspects of resiliency—being able to recover, resist, repair emotionally (e.g. after a tough diagnosis)
• Capacity to learn from and bounce back life’s realities, both gains and losses
• Includes belief in a power beyond self, a future beyond our physical lives, for many
• Is often community based
What spiritual resiliency is NOT:

• “Pie in the sky” romanization of life
• Proselytizing one’s own belief system
• Intolerance of other’s faith
• Self-righteousness
• Self-sufficiency
Above all, spiritual resiliency reflects balance!
How I learned something about this balance—I listened!
Sample

- American & German women and men
- nominated by their peers and pastors
- aged 65+
- 4 per group, 16 total
- One denomination Lutheran
Procedure

• long, in-depth, face-to-face interviews
• verbatim transcription
• Computer coding
• Analyzed by themes
What I received: Hopeful life stories!
The questions I brought to the stories, as a researcher, a pastor, a therapist, are the same questions all of us ask as we listen for strength and hope.
1. Does this older adult have a coherent story that hangs together and sustains her?
2. Is there a fit between the plot of this person’s life story and her self-identity?
3. What is the personal myth I hear in this story that guides his narrative?
4. Is the story flexible and playful, leading to the capacity for forgiveness?
5. What important relationships emerge in this story?
6. Is there a healthy tension between being a unique self and living in community?
7. What is the tone and form of the story?

comic  romantic
Or perhaps

ironic

tragic
Listening to stories in this way gives us a new lens for understanding resiliency!
What I found: above all, an emphasis on community over extreme individuality
A capacity to balance hope and reality
But what is “hope” in the face of reality?

- Moltmann: “The believer is not set at the high noon of life, but at the dawn of a new day at the point where night and day, things passing and things to come, grapple with each other.”
The tendency to be connected to others, yet able to differ at times.
What does it mean to be connected yet differentiated?

• “differentiated attachment” entails both a solid sense of both self identity and a humble ways of relating to others without stranger anxiety leading to rigid power and control. (adapted from Shults and Sandage, 2006)
Rootedness in a religious tradition, yet creativity and playfulness (being change when need be)
The Spirit of Life—rootedness, change

• The experience of the Holy Spirit “awakens new and hitherto unsuspected expectations about life...It is the experience of the Spirit which makes Christians in every society restless and homeless...” (Moltman, 2001)
There were also remarkable male/female preferences (not opposites)
Men, for example, often engaged in critical analysis of others’ beliefs and practices

— “Critique of Judgment” by Nidosfyodor
Their opinions were anchored in a particular community—we critique what we love!
The men needed opportunities to share their ideas.

- Fewer “little complaints,” more focus on big ideas, theology at this life stage.
- Discussing ideas was a way to connect, for the men.
BUT: The men were also able to change their ideas

- Changes in personal situations required new ways to think about identify, and community
The men’s stories were filled with stories of their vocations (not just “jobs”).

Governor's Volunteer Stars Awards

"Everybody can be great because anybody can serve...You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

Martin Luther King Jr.
The women’s stories of resiliency were highly emotional, as was their faith.
The women’s spirituality was also more relational, less abstract, than the men’s.
But for both men and women: resiliency was rooted in spiritual community.
Implications for practice: Some questions

• Do older men have opportunities to critique, to offer their opinions?
• Do older persons receive help re-defining their vocations?
• Are older women encouraged to share their spiritual emotions?
• Are the ups and downs of relationships with self and others attended to as spiritual issues?
Above all, do we make sure that persons in any situation are CONNECTED to the community of their choice?
Conclusion: Symphony as Metaphor for Spirituality
If we listen to the people we serve, we will no longer neglect spirituality as a resource for the journey of life.